

## disasters in the sun by almostblue

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Blood and Gore, Disturbing Themes, F/M, Mentions of Character Death, Multi, Post-Season/Series 03, Soul Bond

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Characters, Steve Harrington

**Relationships:** Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2018-01-13

**Updated:** 2018-03-26

**Packaged:** 2022-04-21 15:29:02

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 6

**Words:** 77,273

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

in the sleepy harvest city of hawkins, indiana, there is a sickness that has never healed.

## 1. friday the 13th

### Author's Note:

everything is so happen!!! this essentially is my personal take on what season 3 will be. quoth the raven, "you have maybe a year or so to outrun canon, so." this is me attempting that. tags will be updated accordingly!

please enjoy ^o^

The summer of 1985 comes as a surprise, like most recent things have in the once sleepy town of Hawkins.

Spring slip-slides from a dewy warmth to an unforgiving swelter at the cusp of May. It seemed like only last night had it still been raining, storm drains roaring with the rush of water like miniature oceans, front lawns thick with mud. Mike hardly notices the change until he stands up from his chair at the last bell on a humid Friday in June—leaps, really—to find that the backs of his thighs peel away from his chair with a sticky noise of skin against plastic.

“Gross, dude,” Lucas snorts. “That was like a leg fart.”

“It’s hot, I’m not going to wear jeans like some tool,” Mike says.

Max, who is very much wearing jeans, makes an offended noise when she overhears this conversation. Her locker clatters as she closes it, shouldering her backpack. “Excuse me?”

“Do you guys always wear jeans in California? I thought you’re supposed to be in your swimsuit all the time. Even when it’s snowing.”

“That would be Billy.”

“Ah,” Dustin says, intelligently.

“Also, it doesn’t snow in California, genius. Unless you go up to Lake Tahoe.”

“Doesn’t snow? Then what’s winter even like?”

“Kind of like autumn here, maybe.” For Will, Max gives a proper answer.

Leaving the building is like walking into Satan’s asscrack. Hawkins hasn’t seen a summer this hot in a while. Mike feels as though his skin is being broiled in the sun, and it’s a Darwinistic game of survival for the kids who are waiting for the bus, clusters of bodies packed tight as sardines in the shade of the trees by the station.

“Goonies tonight!” Dustin cheers as they unlock their bikes from the racks. “Ah, shit—”

The handlebars and seats are scalding to the touch. Even the metal of the chain links is as hot as a pan when Mike reaches to unlock his tire from the rung, and he curses the whole way through undoing it before placing his hand over Lucas’s chest.

“Dude, what the hell—”

“Ah, so nice and cold,” Mike says, sniggering as Lucas snorts and swats his arm away, gives him a shove.

“Son of a bitch,” Dustin says, sweat beading at his jawline already. “It’s like taking two showers a day. Yesterday I opened the fridge and almost pulled everything out so I could hide inside it.”

“Like you did to my fridge?” Will asks dryly.

“Will, you know that was a scientific opportunity that we could not pass up. Mr. Clarke would have wanted us to remain on the curiosity voyage at all costs.”

“Yeah, except Hawkins Lab confiscated it and burnt it to a crisp, so all you accomplished was getting us cleaning duty.”

“I’ll see you guys at the cinema tonight,” Will says, waving. “Is El coming?”

“As if she would pass up a chance to hold Mike’s hand in the dark for two hours? Come on now.”

Mike struggles to and fails to withhold an eyeroll. It's not very effective considering he blushes at the same time he does it, but give him a break. If he had to live not knowing if Eleven was alive or dead or somewhere in between—which is arguably the worst, not knowing—for nearly a year, then he feels like he's earned the license to be equally insufferable about her for another year. Maybe in 1986 they can start roasting him.

"Has El ever seen a movie in theaters?" Max asks as she rolls along beside them on their bikes. The bikeseat is burning through the seat of Mike's pants and he envies Max on her skateboard.

"Not in theaters, no. Only on VHS. Remember when we showed her *Poltergeist* and she just turned to us and went like 'I don't get it'?"

"What's not to get?"

"She can't understand why people go looking for trouble in scary movies," Mike says.

"Oh, Jesus," Max says. "Someone has got to explain to her what kind of guy she's dating, then."

"Uhm! Excuse me! I do not look for—"

"Yes you do," Dustin deadpans. "Hell, we only met El because we were looking for trouble."

"That was different, we were looking for Will."

"By wandering around in dark woods on a stormy night knowing danger was afoot," Lucas finishes. "You have to admit it was borderline idiotic. Not that I wouldn't do it again."

"So you admit it."

"Admit what, Mad Max," Lucas says.

"That you're an idiot?"

"Hell no!"

They separate at a fork in the road—Lucas heads home, likely with Max in tow; Dustin bids them a goodbye with “Goonies at seven on the dot! Don’t forget your tickets!”; and Mike steels himself to take the long meandering dirt road to Hopper’s cabin in the woods. It’s a hair cooler on this side of down, particularly through the wood, with a gentle breeze brushing his bangs off his face to wipe the sweat away with her dry, cracked hands.

The road to Hopper’s cabin is long, but it always feels infinitely longer to know that Eleven is at the end of this road.

There are tire tracks in the dirt at the edge of the woods where Hopper’s truck kicks up the mud, the same place Mike always hops off his bike to walk it through the trees to the cabin.

He, and the rest of the Party save for Dustin, got new bikes during Christmas last year. They had simply grown too tall and gangly to fit on their old cruisers. Mike’s Schwinn is forest green now, lithe and sleek, with tires barely wider than a finger. It’s a road bike, but with some help from Steve—who is surprisingly good with tools for someone who has such pretty hair, Mike’s still getting used to his newfound affection for him—he installed a rack over his back tire so Eleven could still sit behind him as he rode.

The windows are open. Not all the way, but open enough for Mike to see Eleven’s head of curls through the shades, bent over a book. He knocks—five quick in succession, pause, then two. Eleven’s head shoots up, a smile coming over her face, and the door clicks as it unlocks.

“Aren’t you hot in here?”

“There is wind,” says Eleven. She points at the fan, which is rotating back and forth sleepily in the middle of the cabin. “How was school?”

“Hot. Boring. It’s the end of the year, the teachers are doing all the fun stuff now, but in some classes we just watch movies. Which would be so great if they were actually interesting.”

“Boring movies?”

“Yeah, like *Gone With the Wind*.”

“I’ve seen it. I like it.”

Mike raises his eyebrows as he pulls his backpack off and redoes all the locks on the door. It’s a bit much, since Eleven’s mostly out of the woods now, but Hopper had advised him to “exercise some discretion” and “use his God-given common sense sometimes,” so this is him doing that.

“Have you?”

“In the three hundred and fifty-three days, I watched many movies.”

Eleven strings together sentences much longer than the ones she spoke when they had first met. They still tend to sound absurdly formal here and there. The Party, especially Mike and Will, had poured their efforts into teaching Eleven how to read in the time after the closing of the gate. The learning curve had been steep, but one day Mike had stepped into the Hopper cabin to see Eleven with her nose buried deep in *Fahrenheit 451*, so absorbed that Hopper had to clear his throat for her to realize that Mike had come by.

“At least one of us enjoyed it, I guess,” Mike says, collapsing on the lumpy couch so that their knees are touching. He smiles. “Missed you.”

“Missed you too. Only two days.”

“Too long.”

“Two turns of the earth.”

“Definitely too long,” Mike says, but he’s smiling by the time Eleven leans in close to his face and presses a kiss to his mouth. It’s not much more than a brush of lips. Her hands are warm on Mike’s thighs where she’d braced herself and it’s the first welcome heat of the day. “How about your day?”

She makes a face. “Math.”

“Is it hard? If you need help, Lucas is pretty good at it. The best

among us, at least.”

“No. Not hard, but. Too many numbers and letters and symbols all together. Reminds me of the lab.”

“Oh,” Mike says. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, not your fault.”

“But we do have the Goonies tonight! Are you excited?”

Eleven nods, enthusiasm making her whole body bounce on the couch. Her curls have started to relax a little as they grow out into a shaggy curtain around her face and Mike doesn’t hold himself back from brushing a ringlet away from her eyes.

“I guess Hopper can speak to the school about you taking geometry next year if it’s too much. Apparently you can get out of running in gym if you have bad enough asthma.”

“Tell them math makes me tired.”

“Yeah, probably,” Mike laughs.

A pile of Holly’s picture books and children’s chapter books is stacked in the corner by the bookshelf. Mike had brought them over in a sack when Eleven had first asked them where she could start reading, not realizing she’d burn through them within hours and ask if there was anything more interesting to read. That was when he’d brought over his brand-new copy of *Ender’s Game*, *Will Catch-22*, and Max donated *Blood Meridian*, and Lucas had dug up *The Shining* from somewhere in the dregs of his room.

“We’re going to turn her into a serial killer,” Dustin had said, dumping his Tolkien collection into the book sack.

Hopper had spoken of leading “a normal life,” and as far as she’s convinced, one part of that is being literate. Kali, too, had spoken of their lives being stolen.

This is Eleven taking hers back.

“Anyway, we’re probably going to go to Palace Arcade after the movie, and we can teach you to play all our favorite games. But do you think Hopper will let you out that long?”

“How late?”

“Maybe eleven or something? Haha—eleven. We’ll get you home before midnight!”

“It has not been a year yet,” Eleven says, though it’s obvious that she wants to say yes.

“It’s been almost a year. But you don’t have to, if you think it’s too risky.”

“No, I want to.”

“Okay, then we’ll leave a note for Hopper where you are so he knows? If he wants to go into full dad mode and come get you if he needs.”

“He is always full dad mode.”

“Yeah, no kidding, huh.”

And time with Eleven passes like this—easy, fast, the slipping of sand through fingers. Time passes all too slow and much too fast now since Eleven’s return. The time with her is fast. The time apart is slow. Mike just learns to be thankful for the little things, despite how many big things could be better. Will could be in better health, but at least he’s not possessed. He could see Eleven more, but at least she’s here and real. Lucas and Max could be less disgusting, but he’ll take a lovesick Lucas over an angry one any day.

So the time between the afternoon until seven passes fast. It gets hot and muggy in the cabin, so they sit out in the wood under the shade of the trees. Spring had been kind to the forest around the cabin and the grass is soft beneath them, with Eleven holding *The Bell Jar* in her lap as Mike works on their next D&D campaign, a good long one that they’d save for a cooler day. This one will include Eleven and Max and even Nancy and Jonathan and Steve. After all that happened last fall, Mike has a newfound respect for his sister with whom he hasn’t

gotten along in years. She can use a rifle, for starters. He'll never say it to her face, but what a fucking badass.

"What are you doing?"

Eleven wiggles her feet, looking over the top of her book to see a tiny garden of flowers strung through the laces of her shoes.

"Sorry, got distracted from writing." Mike pushes one more flower through the bowtied laces.

"I like it." She taps the toes of her shoes together to make them dance.

"Come on, we should get going if we want to get to the cinema in time for tickets and good seats."

"Good seats?"

"In theaters, the farther you sit from the screen, the better. Also if you get there early enough you can prop your feet up on the chair in front of you before anyone else gets there. Even better, it'll be dark, and everyone's just gonna be looking at the screen. You'll love it. You'll see."

Because people definitely still stare. Eleven doesn't look like a typical Hawkins girl, and there is already enough talk about the police chief's new daughter. A kid of a war friend who passed in an untimely death is the official story. It doesn't help that Eleven likes to dress in a mishmash of boy's and girl's clothing, in baggy jeans and a faded Wonder Woman T-shirt with a neon windbreaker some days or a blazer over a dress on other days.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

Mike pushes off on his bike onto the main road, kicking up little clouds of dust as he gains some speed. The evening has cooled, the air bearable now that the sun is low in the sky. Eleven rests her head against Mike's back between his shoulder blades. She sits sideways now, instead of straddling the bike seat with him, so her feet won't

scrape the road. She's grown, too.

"You know, I was thinking, this summer? Since Max is going back to visit her family in California for a two weeks, it'll just be the original party. We should rebuild Castle Byers. Will's been talking about doing it so it'll fit all six of us. He says he wants it to be bigger. Look different." Mike thinks. "I guess it would make sense. He probably doesn't like it as much as he used to after hiding in Upside-Down Castle Byers for a week."

"That would be cool."

"It would be, right?"

"Steve is good at chopping."

"Yeah, he could help."

"He did a good job helping clean up Will's house."

Mike laughs. That night is simultaneously a faint memory and a fresh wound. Steve had brought them back to the silent Byer household, and it had been a tense waiting game to see whether Will or Eleven returned first, so he'd relegated jobs to everyone to work off the nerves and adrenaline. Will beat out Eleven—looking worse for wear, but alive. Eleven and Hopper must not have been more than ten minutes behind, but it felt like several eternities. Her face had been caked with blood and her skin so translucent Mike could trace all the fine blood vessels around her eyes.

He goes over a bump in the road and Eleven knocks against him.

"Sorry."

"Hey, there they are!"

Lucas and Dustin stand up and wave as Mike pulls into the bike racks beneath the cinema sign. "Where's Will?"

"Jonathan's dropping him off."

"But Jonathan's at my house to—oh," Mike says, nodding. He makes

a face.

To Mike, Hawk Cinema has been a fixture in his life that he can't imagine growing up without. But to Eleven, everything is new. From cotton candy machines, to waffle irons, to this. Glowing movie poster signs flicker by the entrance for *The Breakfast Club* and *Friday the 13th* and *Back to the Future*, which already looks promising. Mike makes a mental note for them to come watch that, too.

"What is that?"

Eleven points at a tall, firetruck-red contraption in the lobby of the movie theater, just beyond the box office.

"Popcorn, you want some?" Max says. "I can eat a whole bucket of that alone. Extra butter is the best. Here, come on. I like watching them kettle pop it."

"Oh, hey! Get us some too." Dustin rustles up some change from his pocket and drops it into Max's palm.

"Arcade after, yeah?" asks Lucas.

"Yes!"

"My mom isn't a fan, but I'll go," Dustin says.

"What? Why? It's like, a five minute bike ride from your house."

"She says this weather isn't natural. Tews has been going bonkers this week."

"Would have expected that from Will's mom, not yours," Mike says.

"I told her that it's just record highs this year. We're living history, mom! But Tews is so well-behaved, and he totally destroyed the armrest on our couch. Tore it right up. And he keeps running headfirst into our door. Doesn't go outside when we open it."

"Being tormented by the ghost of Mews?" Lucas guesses.

"Maybe. Except I don't think Mews is powerful enough to affect the

weather. He was just a fat cat.”

“Hey guys! Sorry, sorry, I’m late—bye Jonathan, bye Nancy!” Will leaps out of the car in a rush, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Stick with the party, got it?” Jonathan calls after him.

“Got it!”

“Are you slowpokes coming or not?” Max shouts from the entrance of the cinema. She holds a giant bucket of popcorn, Eleven armed with another. She’s holding a single popped kernel between her thumb and forefinger to examine it with a catlike fascination, squinting at it before tossing it into her mouth.

“Coming!”

It’s a bit like watching a movie about themselves.

The Goonies have it slightly better than them, though. At least their villains are human, mostly predictable, and not from another dimension bent on the destruction or overtaking of this one. It’s fun, and funny, so much that Dustin chokes on a corn kernel halfway through the movie and has to quietly hack it back up.

“Mikey was so much like Mike I felt the need to reach out and smack him through the screen at least three times in that movie,” Lucas proclaims after it ends.

“Dustin was like Mouth.”

“Are you kidding? Lucas was more like Mouth.”

“I thought Mikey looked like Bob.”

Eleven is met with five pensive gazes.

“I can see it,” Will says. “Maybe if you made Bob like, forty years younger, and skinny.”

“Last one to Palace is a rotten egg,” Max says. She drops her board to the ground and takes off in a blur. This is the cue for them to reenact Mad Max, true to her name, across the city streets.

“No fair! I have extra weight on my bike!” Dustin shouts, Will clinging onto him from behind.

“So do I,” Mike says, pulling up next to Dustin on his bike. Eleven waves, teasing, and Will sticks his tongue out at her and blows a raspberry.

“Extra no fair! You have long spidery legs, Mike!”

“Pedal fast,” Mike says with a shrug. He barely holds back his laughter.

It happens right outside arcade, in the parking lot. Max is already there, Lucas pulling up by the bike racks, two who didn’t need to pull the weight of a second person. Palace pulses with neon blue and orange. The bustle of weekend activity means that a line is forming behind Dig Dug, the screen propped full of quarters. Another group is clustered around Dragon’s Lair. Mike turns to look over his shoulder to see how far behind Dustin and Will are when he hears the rumble, as though it comes from deep within the earth.

“Whoa, d’you hear—”

Then, the shaking. It’s as though the earth beneath the asphalt liquefies, rumbling so hard Mike feels his bike tip and lurch. Sparks fly when the telephone poles sway overhead.

“Shit—”

Both he and Eleven half-fall, half-climb off his bike before they get tossed from it; Dustin and Will aren’t so lucky, being on a smaller bike, and they crumple in the street just outside the parking lot.

The shaking doesn’t cease. An earsplitting screech pierces the evening as the rotating neon sign groans.

“Get out from under the sign!” Mike shouts.

“Move!” Max crashes into Lucas from behind like a battering ram.  
“Move!”

They barely make it—well, they don’t. But the sign follows an oddly angled trajectory as it plummets, missing the two of them by inches. Mike stumbles back into Eleven to shield her body with his as sparks spatter the evening bright and bloody.

“Mike,” she says softly.

The din inside the arcade crescendos to a chaos.

“Eleven are you—you’re okay?”

A thin stream of blood trickles towards her lip. She nods. “Are they?” she asks, and nods to Lucas and Max. “I couldn’t see what direction they ran.”

“You did it. It missed them.”

“Hey! Holy shit, I thought you guys were mincemeat,” Dustin says, grabbing Lucas and Max when they finally join them, jelly-legged. “What the hell just happened?”

“I don’t know, some kind of earthquake?”

“El, holy shit--you saved our *asses*—”

“Earthquakes? In Indiana?”

“Sure.”

“The last devastating quake anywhere near Indiana wasn’t even in Indiana,” Dustin says. “It was in Illinois, and we weren’t even born yet.”

“Oh yeah, it was like, a five point four,” says Will.

“A five point four,” Max repeats like she’s not sure she heard them correctly. “Devastating?”

“That’s halfway to ten!”

“In California, we only consider ducking for cover if it was a six or up.”

“Okay, Earthquake Girl,” Lucas says, not backing down from an argument even with his own girlfriend. “If you’re so well-versed in earthquakes, how much was this one just now on the Richter scale?”

Mike doesn’t hear Max’s answer. Eleven gives him a tug on one of his belt loops, and he turns around to see concern lining her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, turning to face her. She seems spooked, and beckons him to lean in.

“Someone is watching us.”

The evening chills against Mike’s skin.

“Who?” Mike asks. He wants to raise his head and look around, but two years dealing with Hawkins Lab and the Upside Down have taught him not to make it obvious that he knows he’s being watched.

“Behind me,” Eleven says.

Mike flicks his gaze up over the top of her head. The sidewalk is full of people spilling into the street, voices weaving together in frightened alarm about the tremors. Some people are complaining about the damage done to their shops and businesses. Others clutch at each other, hurrying towards their cars.

“Who am I looking for?”

“A boy.”

“A boy, okay.”

“No hair, like me in the beginning.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, Eleven’s unsettled expression begins to make sense. “Are you saying...?”

“I don’t know. I think he might be.”

Mike scans the crowd across the street again. This time, he sees him—a boy with cropped hair, around Lucas's height, with his gaze fixed on them from across the street. He is a single unmoving figure in the frenetic post-earthquake panic, unbothered by the bodies brushing past him.

"I don't think he's watching us," Mike says slowly.

"No?"

"I think he's watching you."

Not everything is perfect.

Not much is perfect, in fact, but there are beginnings of *okay* somewhere the night after Eleven closes the gate. Jim Hopper still doesn't call her anything but "kid," or "El" when she's surrounded by the others (he learned his lesson when he had once just barked "kid" in their general direction to see six pairs of eyes turn towards him). It's born of a fear of loving something enough that its loss would break him, and Hopper isn't sure he'd be able to live through it a second time.

But Eleven smiles now when he pulls up in his police truck, gruffly thanking Karen Wheeler for feeding his daughter yet again, even when he's late (more time with Mike, hey, she can't complain).

Joyce still worries over Will like he's a young sapling in the snow, but she lets Jonathan do the chauffeuring now. He gets dropped off to a lot of places where his friends can bike to and laugh as they do, but at least Jonathan plays all his favorite music in the car.

Billy is better. Not good, but better. When she's driven to school they don't see Max flipping birds at the car that peels out of the parking lot so much anymore, which can only mean progress. Sure, he still blasts music loud enough to rattle the streetlamps, and Max hardly has a good thing to say about him, but as Steve's face heals, Max's fear of turning out like him starts to scab, too.

Dustin gets a new ball python that is very much of this world. He

doesn't let it near Tews and they exist in a strained but respectful harmony.

And Nancy—well, Nancy would be lying if she said she didn't cry when she took down the three dozen or so photos of her and Barbara on her bulletin board. They grew harder to look at day by day, even after the funeral.

Losing someone is funny like that, the way everything reminds you of them. How bits of their life had trickled into all the cracks and crevices of yours to fill up the spaces and give them meaning. There are all the photos, but then there's the hair tie that Barb let Nancy borrow in middle school, with the pink beads. The vanity Nancy had done Barb's hair at before all the school dances. The ballerina music box that Barb had given her for her twelfth birthday. The beat up old diary with pages upon pages of what she and Barb did that week.

Nancy leaves one photo up, of her and Barb at the winter ball sophomore year. There was tinsel in Nancy's hair and her dress had a tacky silver neckline, but she'd liked it so much back then. They hadn't had dates, even though Barb had insisted that tons of guys wanted to ask Nancy to go.

"You okay?"

Nancy startles as Jonathan comes up behind her. "Yeah," she says.

He looks down at the old Polaroid over her shoulder. "You could get that framed."

"They don't make Polaroid sized frames, do they?"

"Sure they do," Jonathan asks. "This is about three by four, right? Maybe not to this exact size, but yeah, we can go to the craft store and find something."

Nancy turns her body to face him properly now, the photo still trapped between their bodies. Jonathan is wearing that black sweater that makes his shoulders look nice, despite how much he slouches, hunching into himself as if to disappear.

"Thank you."

“It’s—”

—*okay, Nancy, it’s no big deal.* Jonathan trails off when realizes she is standing very close and rocking up onto her toes a little. He fights the smile that tugs at his lips, because really, the Jonathan of two years ago would not have predicted that present day Jonathan would be kissing Nancy Wheeler in her room.

Yet here they are.

“Shit!”

The house feels like it’s thrown off its foundation just before their lips meet. Nancy clutches at Jonathan, who stumbles with the shaking. A panicked wailing from Holly filters up the stairs.

“Mom?”

No reply. There is a commotion downstairs of her mother shouting their father’s name, which for the first time possibly ever, is a reassuring sound. Then the soft shattering of glass as several of the photos along the mantel and along the hallways crash to the floor. Several of the lights flicker.

“Mom!”

“Nancy?” The shaking is fading out to gentle tremors, so she opens the door and stumbles down the flight of stairs to see her mother in the dining room. “Nancy! Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I—I was with Jonathan. What happened?”

“Earthquake, I guess.” Her mother hoists Holly up on her hip.

“Let’s see what the news says.” Ted Wheeler frowns when the TV is unresponsive.

“Don’t tell me the power lines are down.”

“They might be,” says Jonathan. “The lights.”

“Where’s Michael?”

"He went to watch The Goonies with the others. He should be okay. I hope he is."

"God, why is it that he's never at home when this kind of thing happens?"

"Mom, it's okay. I'm sure he's fine. There aren't a lot of things that could fall on him in a cinema."

"Except for the roof, maybe," Ted says. Karen glares darts at him.

"They'll head here first, if not, probably to my place. We live out where there's not much, there'll be less chaos for them to wade through."

"Can you go wait on them over there, Jonathan? And give me a call if you see them?"

"I'll go with you," Nancy says.

"Uh-uh, young lady."

"But Mom—"

"We don't know what just happened. I won't have you going out when we don't know where Mike is."

"I—I want to check on the Hollands."

Karen struggles to reply to this. Nancy knows her mother has been softer on both her and Mike this past year, especially after Barb's death had become official. Conflict is apparent on her face, and she finally says, "Jonathan, please don't let her get into any trouble."

"Absolutely not, Mrs. Wheeler. I'm very good at that."

Nancy gives him eyebrows in the car later. "Good at keeping me out of trouble, huh?"

"You have to admit I am."

"And you have to admit it goes both ways."

“Oh, sure, when did I say it didn’t?” Jonathan says, starting to chuckle as he backs the car out of the driveway. “After all, my girlfriend’s the one who knows how to use the gun.”

It’s the talk of the town.

Even on Monday, two full days after the earthquake, the hottest topic isn’t about Carrie Anne’s house party that coming weekend, or the Sadie Hawkins dance the weekend after that. It’s about how many glasses got destroyed in your house, if you lost power, where you were in that moment when it hit.

Joyce had been frantic when Will got home with the rest of the party that evening. He can’t say he blames her; in the past two years, he’s been involved in all manner of weird shit, usually at front and center, so a monster earthquake is reason enough for her to grab him and hug him tight enough to snap ribs.

“Are you okay?” she asked, holding Will’s face in her hands. He nodded.

“That was madness!” Lucas shouted. “Mrs. Byers! You should have seen it. Holy shit!”

But Will knows nothing about anything. He’s definitely safe. He doesn’t feel like he’s losing himself to a demonic entity in his body. He doesn’t feel ill. And, most importantly, he hasn’t seen the Upside Down since the exorcism. So, in conclusion, it can’t have anything to do with him.

Right?

“—absolutely mental Mr. Clarke, Mike was thrown off his bike and everything—”

“Was not! I just fell a little, I didn’t even hit the pavement—”

“And the sign by the arcade smashed in to a bajillion pieces as it fell!”

“Sounds like you had quite the night, Mr. Henderson. I’m just glad you all are okay, some people were injured by falling furniture in my neighborhood. The magnitude was a six point eight on the Richter scale—a real quaker.”

A sudden movement in the glass pane of the door catches Will’s attention. Someone must have come by to ask for help from Mr. Clarke, but it’s nearly summer, and no one is as excited to talk to Mr. Clarke as the four of them. Especially not after school.

Will makes his way to the door and opens it, about to tell whoever it is that class had gotten out over ten minutes ago, come in, come in.

But no one is there.

Faint, dissonant sounds of the band warming up for after school practice drift down the hall. Will steps out into the hallway, sticks his thumbs under the straps of his backpack, and looks down the length of it and over his shoulder.

Still no one. His shoes slap on the linoleum. He makes it all the way down to the end of the hall where the doors are, the windows hot from the summer sun.

There’s nothing.

“William Byers.”

Will whirls around when someone puts a hand on his shoulder, heart shooting into his throat. No one ever calls him by his full name except the principal, and his mother when she’s really, really mad, but he doesn’t come face to face with either of them.

“And you are?”

He doesn’t say that, yes, he is Will. He’s also never seen this person in his life—tall, almost as tall as Mike, with cropped hair. The stranger allows Will to shake his hand off.

“Are you alone?”

Will feels a cold sweat start in the centers of his palms. “No,” he

insists, though Mr. Clarke's classroom is at the other end of the hall.  
"Who are you? What do you want?"

Oddly enough, the boy looks alarmed by his questions.

"Are you not Will Byers?"

"Why?"

"I was looking for someone he might know."

As unsettling as this is, Will's curiosity is piqued. "Who?"

The boy stiffens when Dustin's voice floats down the hallway. Will leans around him to see if they're coming out, but he's knocked off balance when the boy pushes roughly past him and runs out into the school yard, leaving the door swinging behind him.

"Will! What're you doing out here?"

"Thought I heard someone call my name," Will says, straightening his sleeves.

"All the way out here? Do you have bat hearing?"

"Or owl hearing," Lucas says.

Mike gives him a sidelong glance, like he's not convinced, but smart enough not to ask. Well, at least not within earshot of Dustin and Lucas, who have the double-edged fortune and misfortune of not seeing the worst of Will's possession last autumn.

"You weren't seeing now-memories again, were you?"

"No." Mike raises his eyebrow. "No, I really wasn't! I promise. I haven't seen anything from that world since that night."

"But you did see something."

"Someone," Will admits. "A stranger."

"He was just walking past or something?"

“No, he,” Will purses his lips. “He knew my name. He said he was looking for someone I knew.”

“Was he tall, in a suit or something, with snow-white hair?” Mike asks, immediately agitated, and Will blinks in confusion.

“No, no, he was about our age. About your height. Short hair, greenish-brown eyes. He seemed scared when I asked him what he wanted.”

“That’s new,” Michael says.

“Who’s the tall man with white hair?”

“Oh, some psycho freak from the Lab. He died before we got you back.”

“You sure don’t make it sound like he died, if you’re asking me about seeing him around our school.”

“I didn’t see his body.”

“You really believe in seeing bodies now before reaching a conclusion, huh,” Will jokes. He tries to joke, anyway, but Mike levels him a serious expression and the smile fades from his mouth.

“After you and Eleven, I don’t really believe anyone is dead until it’s as proven as it can get. I didn’t stick around to see what happened after that Demogorgon broke through the wall that evening, I just heard him yelling, and he was replaced by Doctor Owens. But obviously for him, I want to think he’s dead.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not something you need to be apologizing for!”

“Okay. Sorry. I mean, I know.”

Mike laughs. “Of all the things you’re good at, Will, not saying sorry is the one thing you absolutely suck at.”

Of all the things that Jim Hopper has learned and forgotten and had to relearn (how to cook proper meals, how to keep work at work, and how to make beds), the one thing he never thought he would have to relearn is how to do his daughter's hair. It's one thing he never thought he could bear relearning.

"Sorry kid," he mumbles around a bobby pin. Eleven pulled a face when he tugged too hard on her hair, but otherwise makes no noise at all. It's a constant and unnerving reminder what she must have endured—he's never once heard her say *ow* or *ouch*, even when she insisted on helping slice the fruit for Sunday brunch and cut her finger open. She'd simply stared at the blood streaming into her palm and calmly asked if he had a bandage.

"Too tight?"

"It's okay."

"Thank god these dances only happen twice a year," Hopper says. He's not sure he wants to entertain using the curling iron more than once every six months.

"Thank you," she says as he pins her bangs out of her face.

"You're growing up too fast, kid."

"Mike grows faster."

"Yeah, Wheeler looks like more of a praying mantis every time I see him," Hopper grunts. He still remembers the two of them falling into each other's arms in the foyer of Joyce's house and realizing just how long it must have been for both of them to be apart. Two years ago Mike and Eleven had been eye to eye. That night, Eleven could hardly prop her chin over his shoulder.

Three hundred and fifty three days turns into a slow, sleepy blink when you get to the age that Jim Hopper is. For them it must have felt like an eternity.

"A handsome praying mantis."

"Sure."

Jim has never had to learn, or even understand, the feeling of dropping off his daughter at a school dance. He's done it once before, but he must confess that it's yet another thing that he hasn't gotten used to. Eleven slides out of her seat and smooths down the pleats of her dress—floral this time, a generous donation from Nancy—before making her way into the Hawkins Middle School gym.

"I'll be here at ten. No ifs, ands, or buts."

"I know."

"And uh," Jim clears his throat. "Have fun, kid."

"I will!"

Hopper watches her go. The gym doors are decorated this time with pink and orange and yellow crepe streamers instead of the silver tinsel of winter, fluttering when the doors swing shut. He lights a cigarette, Zippo clicking as he snaps it shut.

"You're getting good at this, huh?"

Joyce's voice comes from around the vicinity of his elbow, and Hopper looks down to see her with her arms crossed, hunched over as if cold. "Good at what?"

"Her hair looks nice. I didn't get any frantic calls asking how to put hair in a curling iron this time around."

"You live and you learn, I guess." He offers his cigarette and she takes a long pull. She doesn't cough anymore.

"I guess."

"Will doing alright?"

"He says he's fine."

"Earthquake must've given you a scare."

"God." Joyce shakes her head. "Sometimes I dream, like—I dream about a day when I won't be afraid after every little odd thing that

happens.”

“It’ll come, Joyce.”

“It’s been months.”

“Months aren’t enough.” Hopper takes another drag of his cigarette when she hands it back. “Give it a few years. Maybe a lifetime. This kind of thing follows you like a ghost. It’s just that one morning you wake up and realize that you’ve learned how to live with it.”

Joyce probably thinks he means Sara. It’s not that he doesn’t, but for the first time, he means Eleven too.

“You’re doing a good job, Hop.”

Jim smiles.

“Not too shabby yourself, Joyce.”

For most of his short life, Mike has never been the center of any welcome attention in school. He was the kid that always had his nose in a binder full of dragon illustrations, the kid people pitied because Troy and James picked on The Party, or the kid that got all weird after the Will Byers incident. Really weird. Quiet, nerdy Mike, who became a bit of a legend last year for telling Mr. Kowalski he was full of shit in front of the entire class.

Right now he’s the kid that somehow has a date with the Chief’s new daughter. What the hell. There’s no way he didn’t pay her to do this. How does he even know her, for starters? She looks familiar, like they’ve seen her somewhere before. Maybe once with blonder hair, or a pinker dress.

Mike doesn’t know what his face is like when he crosses the dance floor to meet her at the entrance. *Stupid* is a good guess, he supposes. A shy smile spreads across her mouth when she sees him.

“Hey.”

She just smiles wider, ducking her face like she can't look at his expression too long.

"Pretty good?" she asks, addressing his tie more than Mike.

"Gorgeous," he says.

Eleven blushes high in her cheeks.

"Handsome," she replies, taking the hand he offers her.

"Thanks! I did my tie myself this time. Windsor knot and all."

"Is that fancy?"

"Fancier than Dustin's or Lucas's? Hell yeah. Except Will has a bowtie, which is very snazzy."

"Where are they?"

"Waiting for you!"

They want a picture. The line had been too long at the Snow Ball for it a group photo to be practical, and Jonathan is doing photos again for Sadies. It would only make sense, between the Party finally having a few months of peace, and Eleven home. Mike is actually excited for it despite hating having his picture taken.

"There she is," Dustin singsongs. "Jesus Mike, don't tread on the flowers."

"I was not treading on—"

"Yeah Mike, you have all evening to look at her like she defeated Palpatine and hung the stars in the sky," Max says, pushing past Mike, who sputters defensively, to grab Eleven's hand. Her hair has been clipped back and smoothed into sleek curls so bouncy that one would be tempted to reach out and pull on one just to watch it spring back into place. "Come on, we've been waiting for you to get here so we can take photos already! I'm tired of looking nice."

Jonathan is a natural behind his camera. He seats Eleven and Max on

the crates in the front and instructing the four boys to strand and arrange themselves behind them. There are a lot of limbs and not a lot of space, so after some fumbling, they jigsaw themselves together into something presentable.

“Mike, you’re a goddamn ent. Switch places with me, you’re too tall to stand in the middle.” Dustin squeezes between Mike and Lucas.

“That means you too, Lucas,” says Will, darting in between Lucas and Dustin so that he’s sandwiched by Dustin. “You can stand next to Max later.”

Jonathan rolls his eyes.

And it is an evening of almost-teens being almost-teens: stupid, silly, embarrassing, full of awkward contact between people who want desperately to know who they are. Eleven is put off by songs that require her to move any faster than the gentle sway back and forth in time with the music. Lucky for the both of them, those are songs that Mike is so okay sitting out on.

“You want some punch?”

“Juice punch?”

“Yeah, juice punch.”

“I would like some.”

“Kay, wait here,” Mike says.

Nancy mans the punch table again this year. One side of her mouth quirks up a little higher when Mike comes up to the table.

“Can I get two?”

“One for El?”

“Yes,” Mike says testily.

Nancy nods, ladling a spoonful of bright red punch into the Dixie cup.

“Stop.”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Ugh.”

“I just was thinking how you insinuated you were disgusted when I asked you if you liked Eleven back when this all started.”

“You also said you didn’t like Jonathan.”

“I think a better way of looking at it was that I didn’t know I liked him.”

“Well then—then how was I supposed to know I liked El!”

“You weren’t supposed to know it,” Nancy says, handing him a cup for each hand. “That’s what made it the saddest part.”

“Huh?”

“Go deliver libations to thy girlfriend, young paladin,” Nancy says. If she’d intended for the weird change in tone, then she doesn’t acknowledge it, already turning to the girl in line after Mike with a smile on her face.

What made what the saddest part? Liking Eleven?

Mike shakes it off.

She’s not at the table Mike left her at. There’s another gaggle of girls sitting there now, fingers sticky with donut glaze. One of them shoots him a look that starts as a sneer but turns into a combination of respect and confusion when she remembers oh yeah, Mike is apparently cool enough to date in a pretty girl’s eyes. The pecking order dictates that he commands some modicum of respect now.

“Did you see a girl sitting here?” he asks. He’s never spoken to Lorraine Watson in his life and planned on graduating without ever doing so. “Uhm, Jane. She was in a flower print dress.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“No,” she says.

“Are you sure? She was sitting here just a few minutes ago?”

“I didn’t see her.” Lorraine shrugs. “Maybe she went to the bathroom?”

Mike frowns and scans the bobbing heads over the dance floor. With Eleven there is never such a thing as *maybe she went to the bathroom*.

“I think I saw her leave.”

This time it’s Annie McClain who speaks. Mike has only ever seen her hanging around Jennifer.

“You did?”

“Yeah, with some other guy.” She gives him a patronizing once over. “Maybe you should go find her.”

Some other guy? “Here,” he says, shoving the cups of juice into her hands.

“Hey! You got it on my—”

But Mike is already halfway through the throng of bodies, mumbling *’scuse me, ’scuse me*, to all the people whose toes he treads on. Will catches him as he wiggles his way out between two particularly tall couples.

“Mike! What—where are you going?”

“El—Elev—I mean. Jane! I can’t find her—”

“Hey, it’s okay. There are a lot of people here, have you looked first?”

“Annie McClain said she left with some other guy!”

“Dude, Annie McClain is a grade A degenerate bitch,” Max says.

Dustin whistles low at the insult. The hair around her face is starting to come away from the hairspray and gel, fanning out in a cloud of flame around her head, so she looks and sounds threatening. “I wouldn’t be so fast to trust her. Maybe she’s just trying to make you look like a fool.”

“I actually wouldn’t put that past her,” Lucas says.

“No, she—I was only—I was just gone for like, seconds! Okay, minutes. I just went to get some punch and she was at the table in the back, then when I went back they were all sitting there looking at me like I was idiot for not knowing. And that she left with someone.”

“Well, if it was minutes ago, then they can’t have gone far. Also, relax, Mike, you need to remember El—I mean, Jane—can literally kill people with her mi—I mean, handle herself.”

“Nice save,” Lucas says dryly.

“What the hell are we waiting for then?” says Max. “Come on numbskulls, let’s go look.”

They nearly mow down a girl who’s coming in late. “Sorry, sorry!” Lucas throws over his shoulder.

“I’ll take the east wing.”

“I’ll look in the west wing.”

“Then I’ll take north.”

“Will, you and I can take the fork in the south,” Mike says.

Wandering the halls of Hawkins Middle School at night reminds him so much of the nightmarish evening that they had lost Eleven that Mike needs to steel himself as he and Will head down the south wing. Will seems to know it, too.

“Hey. We’ll find her.”

“I hope so.”

"It probably sounds weird to say this, but I wish I were there that night."

"Not weird."

"No?"

"Of course not, Will. Why would it be?"

"It must've been terrifying."

"Yeah," Mike says, unable to help the humorless laugh that escapes from his throat. "Yeah, it was. It was scary."

"But?" Will prompts when he doesn't continue.

"No, it's stupid."

"Okay," Will says. Lucas probably would have retorted that he was being stupid, which would also be—not incorrect.

"The demogorgon was scary. Especially when it cornered us in Mr. Clarke's classroom, holy shit. I thought we were dead for sure. But it was scarier not knowing where Eleven was, if she was alive or dead. In the face of losing her, confronting the demogorgon didn't seem scary at all."

"Oh."

"I told you it was stupid."

"I don't think it's stupid. It makes sense."

"How?"

"When I was in the Upside Down, I had to live with the demogorgon for—well, I guess for seven days in this dimension. I was obviously scared of it. That's why I hid in Castle Byers. But after the initial fear wore off, the thought of Mom never knowing what happened to me and dying alone was so much scarier."

Mike quirks up one side of his mouth. "See, it sounds so much better

when you explain it.”

Will laughs.

They split at the fork in the wing—Will taking the right, Mike taking the left. Lockers line the hallway down to the exit, the glowing sign a bright acid green in the dim fluorescent lighting. The tiger paw of their mascot has long since been repainted, but Mike stands before it, alone, gripped by the haunting memory of losing Eleven.

What he thought was old and weathered still hurts as much as a fresh wound: the fear of being surrounded by people he knew were after her, the sallow quality of her skin when she killed them, the helpless way she called out for him and tried to squirm her way out of Brenner’s arms.

He stands and stares and remembers.

“Still nothing!” Will shouts, voice echoing. Mike jumps.

“No luck here, either,” he shouts back.

He traipses down another row of classrooms. Another row of lockers. Just as Mike is about to give up and consider jogging back to Will to look elsewhere, he catches a long shadow spilling over the linoleum by the drama theater entrance. It casts a fading poster of *Jesus Christ Superstar* into darkness.

“Hey—hey, excuse me, have you—El! Eleven!”

Mike’s feet carry him to her without him registering it. There’s a boy in front of her, as promised, and Mike recognizes him as the same one who had been standing across the street from Palace last week, staring at Eleven. Anger starts to boil in his stomach until he sees Eleven’s expression. It isn’t scared. Surprised, maybe. He tries not to raise his hackles (he fails, but hey, he tried).

“And who are you?”

“Mike, it’s okay.”

He definitely looks unconvinced, because she reaches out for his

hand. "It's okay. Promise."

"Okay," Mike says. "But who is he?"

Eleven reaches out for the stranger's wrist. He complies, although woodenly.

A little like Eleven. A little like he's not very good at picking up on social cues.

"Look," she says.

The light above their heads is weak, the buzzing kind of bulb that gives you a headache during tests and puts you sleep during class, but it is bright enough for Mike to read the ink in his skin.

013.

Thirteen.

What is nothing less than a full-blown interrogation is taking place in the dressing room of the drama theater. They'd pushed him into a chair and turned on one of the vanity lights, and Thirteen's gaze pingpongs between Mike's face to Eleven's face, to Dustin and Lucas, then Will and Max.

If the first time was anything to go off of, Dustin can't imagine Lucas is too pleased about this so far. Then again, Lucas is no longer the disbelieving child he once was. The disbelieving children they all once were, save for Mike, who had never not believed Eleven for a second. So he supposes that just makes the two of them, and Mike, and Eleven, and Thirteen.

You could call him a cautionary teen now, thank you very much.

Logically it shouldn't be surprising that there are more of them. Eleven had explained, after she had closed the gate and all was said and done, why she walked into the Byers' house looking like the sixth member of Bon Jovi. Something about hitchhiking, an Indian girl named Kali who was really her sister, and having the number eight

on her wrist. Eleven had held up her wrist, tapped it once, twice, three times, and said “Eight. Kali. She was my sister.”

So if there is an Eight, and an Eleven, then there should be a Nine and a Ten. Maybe even a One through Seven. Then, why not Twelve and Thirteen?

“Do you know a Twelve?”

Thirteen shakes his head. Well, he’s already more responsive than Eleven was when they first found her, so that’s promising.

“Then how about any other numbers?”

“Two is dead,” says Thirteen. He seems to fumble with his words, and the sight of it gives them such a sense of *deja vu* to a rainy night in Mirkwood that he can feel Lucas soften beside him.

“Two, as in two of them, or Two, the person?”

“Two. More are dead. Four, and. Uhm, Six and Seven are dead.”

“What happened to them, do you know?” asks Michael.

At this, Thirteen just looks to Eleven. To everyone’s surprise, even her own, she stiffens and sways, reaching out for Mike’s arm and to steady herself.

“Hey,” he says, anger rising once more in his throat. “What did you do? Leave her alone!”

“It’s okay, Mike. I’m okay.”

“You don’t—*look* okay,” Dustin says.

It’s true. While Eleven’s face doesn’t have any of the trademark pallor when she strains herself, her nose is bleeding, and it doesn’t appear like she’d used her powers.

“Car.” She looks back to Thirteen, then to Mike. She, too, struggles for words, despite the many months since she’s been reading and picking up the Party’s words and sentences. “Hit them. It hit Six and

Seven.”

“Oh,” Mike says. “They were in an accident?”

Thirteen nods.

“How do you know?”

“He showed me.” Eleven sounds as confused as Dustin feels. “In my head, but I saw it.”

“In your void?”

“No, not in the void.”

“Telepathy,” Dustin offers.

“Telepathy?”

“It’s when you can talk to someone else, but in each other’s heads. You can cast it for one day across an unlimited range and communicate with any other creature with whom you are familiar in the same plane! Will just used it in our last campaign.”

“I don’t know if he appreciates us comparing his ability to a D&D tactic,” says Will.

“We compared everything about the Upside Down to D&D stuff. Makes it less scary.”

“Maybe if the names of monsters were ‘Princess Dianagorgon of Wales—’”

“Point is, what brings you here to Hawkins? Were you looking for Eleven?”

Dustin has to hand it to Mike. As much as Lucas is skeptical of strangers, Mike is accepting of them. Well, with the exception of Max, where the tables were turned, and the reason is standing next to him right now with a bloody nose.

“Yes.” Thirteen thinks. “And no.”

Lucas finally groans here. “Mike. Why is it that we collect a weirdo one year, and then a psycho another?”

“You collected a zoomer last year.”

“Yeah, and that was the only good decision we made that year. What do you think would’ve happened if she hadn’t been there to knock Billy out cold?”

Dustin rolls his eyes.

“Be nice, Lucas.”

Lucas heaves a martyred sigh but shuts up.

“Then what about Two and Four?”

“Two,” Thirteen says, haltingly once more. He looks at Eleven again, and this time, she’s more prepared—but whatever he shows her leaves her at a loss for words too. She does her best.

“He ate something. He died.”

“Someone poisoned him?”

“Himself.”

“Oh,” Dustin says. A somber silence settles over them. In the past two years, the Party has experienced more brushes with death in their fourteen years alive than most people do in a lifetime, but they and everyone they’ve known have fought against it tooth and nail. It is unfathomable and heartbreaking to know that someone would willingly choose it. Usually when Eleven has to use a roundabout way to explain a single word, Mike will supply his best guess and nod as she repeats it, rolling the word around her tongue like hard candy. It happens less now that she reads so much.

He doesn’t say what it is this time.

Eleven reaches for Mike’s hand when his expression grows stricken and stony all at once, and he gives it a little squeeze. A wordless *it’s okay, I’m okay*. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Did you see all of this happen?” asks Lucas.

“For Two, not with my eyes. Only Six and Seven.”

“In the void,” Eleven guesses.

Thirteen shakes his head. As responsive as he is, he’s nearly as taciturn as Eleven. “Before it happened.”

“Before?”

“How is that even possible?”

“You can see the future,” Max posits.

A hush falls over them when Thirteen nods.

Then, “Am I going to be rich?” Dustin says.

“Ooh! How about me?” says Max. “And also, does my brother marry someone way too good for him but end up miserable and alone because she realizes her true self worth and leaves him for a rich handsome man with two dogs? Please say yes.”

“That is blisteringly specific. Are you okay?” asks Dustin.

“Are there going to be any more Star Wars movies?” Mike asks, unable to help himself.

“Will Papa come back?”

Eleven’s voice is so soft that it’s barely audible over the din of questions, but everyone looks to her gravely.

“You should answer that one first,” Lucas says.

“He can’t pick and choose what future he wants to see,” Dustin says.

“How do you know so much about the others, then? The other numbered kids like you?”

He shrugs.

Mike is okay with not knowing how Thirteen knows these things. After all that has happened to them, he has little problem chalking it up to the idea that all the children that Hawkins Lab had experimented on had a connection that none of them would ever really understand. If Eleven can open gates to other dimensions and throw vans around with her mind and Kali can make people see collapsing bridges, then a telepathic link between thirteen superpowered kids doesn't seem all that far-fetched.

"Were you born with these abilities?" says Max.

"Don't know. I don't remember not having them."

"Wait, but you said yes and no." Mike crosses his arms, then holds one hand out in the universal gesture of *so, let me get this straight*. "What part is the yes? Yes, you were looking for Eleven?"

Thirteen nods.

"And no, you weren't looking for her?"

"That doesn't make any sense," Lucas says, patience stretching thin again. "How do we know he's not dangerous?"

"Because Eleven isn't!" Dustin says.

"I don't know about you, but the way she told us about Kali, I would not want to cross the witch."

"I did not know who I'd find here," Thirteen finally says.

"Huh?"

"I knew one of us would be here in Hawkins. I did not know it would be Eleven. In the winter I saw something. A girl with purple hair and a girl with short curly hair. Two twins with long braids. And others. I follow what I see. I saw you," he points at Lucas, "and you," at Will. "Sorry for frightening you earlier this week."

"It's okay," Will says.

"He's the one you saw in the hallway?" Dustin asks.

“He said he was looking for someone I knew,” Will says.

“Yes. I’d seen Eleven talking to you.”

They regard him with a stunned silence.

“So you follow whatever you see?” asks Will.

“No. Not everything.”

“So you must have had a reason to travel so far.”

Thirteen tears his gaze away from Dustin’s, looking down at the tangle of his own fingers in his lap. He seems afraid to say, afraid to even think, as if his thoughts aren’t safe.

“I saw a man,” he says.

“A man?”

“A tall man,” Thirteen says. “In a dark suit, always.”

“Holy shit,” Lucas says.

“What? What’s he talking about?” Max hisses.

“And hair as white as snow,” Thirteen says, looking up, into Eleven’s face.

“No,” she whispers, and even as she does, Dustin can feel his blood turning to ice in his body. He’s glad Mike has her hand in his, fingers squeezing so tight he’s whiteknuckling.

“I saw him,” he says, shaking. “I-I know him.”

“Where? Where did you see him?”

Thirteen swallows.

“Here.”

**Notes for the Chapter:**

after i realized that careless whisper was released in 1985 i couldn't unthink or unhear or disassociate it from the sadies scene. i did this to myself and now i do it to you. oh and also! the title is from hamlet actually. anyway thank you for reading and i'll work hard on the next chapter!!!

## 2. the fog

### Summary for the Chapter:

in the sleepy harvest city of hawkins, indiana, there is a sickness that has never healed.

### Notes for the Chapter:

\*dustin drumroll hands\* chapter 2!!!

Eighth grade ends in a haze of yearbook signing and promises to keep touch over the summer that won't be honored.

*To Mr. Michael Wheeler,*

*It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have taught you in my classes for these past two years. Now that you're moving on to high school, I know that I will remember you and your enthusiasm for learning for many years down the road. Imparting knowledge of our great, big, terrifying, amazing universe upon students like you is what makes teaching worth every moment. Stay curious. It keeps you alive.*

*All the luck in your future endeavors,*

*Mr. Clarke*

"I'm going to miss Mr. Clarke more than I miss authentic Nilla Wafers," Dustin says sadly, reading his yearbook signature from him.

"He was the only cool teacher we ever had," Lucas says.

"Plus, Nancy told me that the freshman biology teacher at Hawkins High sucks hobbit balls," says Mike. "He gives pop quizzes every week, on different days."

"No," Dustin whines. "I hate reading as soon as it's assigned reading."

"'Stay curious. It keeps you alive.' The irony," says Will, reading over Mike's elbow.

"He's still kind of right?"

"Curiosity literally killed my cat."

“Okay, in your defense, it was an accident. Stupid. Amazingly stupid, but,” Mike says.

“I can’t believe we’re free,” Max says, groans, really, dropping her yearbook in the grass and unzipping her backpack. She grabs it by the bottom and upends the entire contents into the trash can, stubby pencils clanging against the metal, shaking it so that the pile of worksheets from what must be December of last year funnels into the bin. Once her beat-up Jansport resembles a deflated red balloon, she shoves her yearbook back into her bag and straightens up to four pairs of raised eyebrows. “What?”

“You just threw everything away.”

“Uh, yeah?” she says, shrugging. “Do you not?”

Will elects not to disclose that he still has his art projects from kindergarten stashed in his room somewhere.

“I kind of do,” Mike says.

“I got into the habit of it after Billy would go through my stuff and laugh at my test scores and call me a hopeless idiot,” Max says. Her board clatters to the asphalt and she hops on.

“As if he tests any better? I doubt it,” says Dustin.

She laughs. “I know, right?”

“But you’re not technically free until like, July, are you,” Mike says.

He’s right. In two days Max is getting on a plane to head west to California to visit her grandparents on her mother’s side in a city “an hour-ish from Los Angeles,” called Thousand Oaks. Apparently it gets its name for just having a ton of oak trees. Go figure.

“Yeah. Downside, you guys are going to get to do a bunch of cool stuff without me. Bright side, I miss a big city.”

“Hawkins still not good enough for you, huh?”

“You can take the girl out of California,” says Max, “but you can’t

take California out of the girl.”

Mike snorts. “Well, when you’re off surfing, or eating avocados, or whatever it is, we’ll rebuild Castle Byers so it’s bigger and cooler by the time you get back.”

“No, why’d you have to go and tell me that? Now I want to go even less. Also I don’t eat avocados. They’re disgusting as hell.”

“Sleepover at your place for the D&D campaign tonight, right?” Lucas asks. “Finally, it’s cold enough to actually get in a sleeping bag. El’s coming?”

“Yeah, El’s coming. And don’t forget your pillow, Lucas. You always do.”

“Do not!”

“Do too!”

“Do not. Why does it even matter, you can just share one with El.”

“Can not!” Mike says, blushing up to his hairline.

“Can too! And you know it.”

“I’m excited for it,” says Will. “I heard you put Nancy and Steve and Jonathan in this one.”

“What! From who?”

Truth: Lucas. But he heard it from El, so it’s not technically lying when “El,” is what Will says, because Mike wouldn’t get mad at Eleven.

“Oh, did she tell you?” says Mike, who visibly chills out. It’s almost comical how Eleven is essentially an instant Mike sedative for anything. *Oh no Mike, Eleven accidentally broke the Millenium Falcon. That’s okay, it was getting old, anyway. Oh no Mike, Dustin ate your leftover pizza that you were saving for after school. Did he? Oh he is in the fuck for it now! Dustin! Son of a bitch, Dustin!* “Yeah, it’s going to be so cool. You’ll see.”

“Should I bring snacks?”

“As long as snacks doesn’t mean a five-pound bag of nougat from Big Buy.”

“Fuck off! I was going to bring caramel.”

“Oh, bring the caramel!” Will says. “I want some!”

“How’s El coming over?”

“Hopper’s driving her over.”

“Damn. I would’ve thought you would pick up the princess on your titanium chariot,” Max says, who cackles when Mike aims a swat at her with his yearbook.

“I was, carrot-head. But then Hopper said something about fog moving in tonight and not wanting us to bike through it. Whatever.”

“Fog? It’s the middle of summer.”

“That’s what I said!”

*Mike.*

The one who wore stripes was, to his knowledge, named Michael Wheeler, responded primarily to Mike, and was the informal leader of the little troupe that had been dragging Eleven around the city like a circus animal. He could not say he was entirely angry with Michael Wheeler. There was a fire to him, one that sparked and flared at the edges. A fire that Martin Brenner admired and respected. He had protected Eleven for a week with that fire, after all, and Martin Brenner was a man of equal exchange. So he let them live.

Granted, they were sidetracked by the arrival of the beast. It all worked out in the end, though, had it not?

Not really, he supposed. Eleven had vanished. The lab was desecrated by scientists who touted *morals* and *ethics* and denounced human experimentation. It was an insult. He had gotten so far with not only Eleven but all his research before the accident with the gate. Furthermore, Brenner decided, the part of loss of limb seemed like it could have been avoided, but if things were going to work out this way, he found he shall not complain.

She could have been amazing. The government would have been so proud of MKUltra. And, ultimately, international security could have been so easily improved. People would be safe. No one would have to live in fear of the Russians, or the Japanese, or be hurt anymore.

But she was a good girl, and she made this easy.

“Sir—sir?”

Waking up was white sheets, antiseptic, and blue fluids. There was a faint beep of a monitor somewhere close by.

“Mr. Brenner, sir, can you hear me?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Try not to move too much, sir. You’ve been unconscious for quite a few days.”

“How long?”

“Quite a while, sir. You were in a very traumatic animal attack, and unfortunately, we were not able to save your right arm. We’re so sorry.”

He tried to wiggle it. “Thank you, dear. Thank you.”

“Is there family you’d like for me to contact? There were several numbers listed as your emergency lines, but most of them went to dead phones. It doesn’t seem like anyone has visited yet.”

“Would you be a dear, and contact Ray Carroll for me, please?”

“And is that a sibling? Parent?”

“That would be a colleague.”

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid colleagues are not valid emergency contacts, sir.”

Brenner glanced at the tag on her blouse. “Donna,” he said.

“Sir?”

“Donna, I too am afraid to tell you that he is the only one I have left. You live as long as I do, you see a lot of people leave you throughout your lifetime. It’s a sad existence to lead. Now, I know it’s unconventional, but Ray Carroll is my closest friend and confidante, and I would prefer him to see me in this state. I’d love to get better, but in order to do that, I’ll need your help.”

“Absolutely, sir, that’s—that’s what we aim for in medicine.” She blinked, dazed by his eloquence moments after waking up from being borderline comatose. “I’ll speak to the head doctor and tell him you’ve woken up, and then I’ll see about finding Ray Carroll. Please get some rest.”

“Thank you, Donna.”

The door shut with a click behind her as she went. Brenner leaned back in his pillows. A sense of disorient trickled along the length of his body, and he gingerly reached over with his left hand—nearly squidlike with the mass of tubing that has been fed into the back of his hand—to touch at what must be a stump of his right arm. It touched something warm, and a noise of surprise bubbled up in his throat. Brenner tried to flex the fingers of his right hand.

Then he squirmed, and though it felt as if his arm was controlled by a part of him he didn’t have full autonomy over, he withdrew his right arm from beneath the covers. It was intact and whole.

He held it up to the light.

"I can't believe that took," Max yawns so widely her jaw cracks, her last two words sounding like an owl hoot, "ten hours? Do all these campaigns take half a day?"

"Our record was fifteen back in summer of '82, remember that?" Dustin says, unwrapping his fourteenth 3-Musketeer bar and popping half of it in his mouth. "Anyone want the last half?"

"No," everyone says in unison.

"The only other living creature who had taste on this godforsaken earth was Dart," Dustin mutters, shoving the rest in his mouth and crumpling the wrapper.

"Who wants the couches?"

"I'm taking one!"

"Aw, I wanted the couches."

"Nuh-uh. You're not even short enough to fit on it," Will says, spreading out his sleeping bag over the seat cushions, booting Lucas out of the way with his hip.

"You should let the girls on the couches," Dustin says gallantly.

"Oh, yeah. Max—"

"I do not need a couch," Max says, sniffing and throwing her sleeping bag down on the floor.

"El?" asks Mike.

She eyes the couch against the wall where she'd once lay on her stomach, feet in Mike's lap, after they'd gotten back from accidentally setting the big radio on fire at their school. "Do I have to?"

"No, of course not. You can sleep wherever."

"Here, someone help me push the table out of the way. We're too tall to fit without moving it now. Goddamnit—ow, Dustin! That was my toe!"

“Oops. Sorry.”

“What do people do at sleepovers?”

“Huh?”

“What do you do?”

“Oh, uh,” Mike straightens up. “We don’t actually get a lot of sleeping done, to be honest. We’ll stay up talking about campaigns if we had one that evening. Or a movie if we watched one. Or both. Or argue about stupid stuff. Or sometimes we do ‘remember when,’ which is always funny. Mostly we just shoot the shit until someone falls asleep. First one to go loses.”

“Loses?”

“Yeah, we try to beat each other out in staying awake.”

“Then Mike’s mom makes us extra fluffy pancakes in the morning because she knows we probably didn’t get any sleep,” Lucas says. His sleeping bag is mummy-style, tapered near the feet. He lays it out between Mike and Max.

“And Eggos?”

“And Eggos.”

“Christ on a stick. You guys, look.”

“What?”

Dustin peers out of the windows in the door to the basement. “The fog outside is crazy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, come see.”

The six of them gather round by the door, trying to squeeze around shoulders and bodies and catch a glimpse of the outside world. Yet Dustin was right—the fog is so thick that they can barely see

anything farther than the stairs down to the door. Even the dual streetlamps visible from this window are faint murmurs of light in the haze.

“Wonder if that earthquake caused it?” says Will.

“I dunno,” says Dustin. “I wouldn’t say earthquakes are precursors for fog.”

“It looks pretty cool. Creepy as hell, but cool.”

“Thirteen said that he saw the white-haired man alive and here. You don’t think—?”

“No, he said it wasn’t now. Not for a while. Or he would have come earlier, remember?”

Lucas frowns. “I just don’t know if his timeline is all in the right order.”

The night of Sadie Hawkins had ended strangely. Not bad, but strange. The last question they managed to get out of Thirteen was nothing substantial at all—where he’d come from. His answer had been a shrug and “Farther west.” The sound of faculty asking what they were doing in the drama room, they were supposed to be at the dance, distracted them—and by the time they’d turned back to look at Thirteen, he was gone and the door was open.

“What are you all doing in here? The dance is in the gym.”

“Right—sorry Mrs. Leland.”

Their best guess had been teleportation. Eleven said she’d never heard of anyone from the lab being able to do it, but again, none of them would put it past a lab child at this point.

“Maybe. But what can we do until he comes back?” Will says.

“We should bind and gag him when he does!” Dustin suggests.

“No,” they say.

Tonight is a remember when kind of night, when they finally get done looking at the fog and climb into their sleeping bags. There's about ten straight minutes of rustling nylon, mumbled apologies when limb jabs into limb, and "man, I need to pee," before they get started.

"Remember when the fire alarm went off in fourth grade and Dustin was so startled he cried?"

"Will! Why!"

Will laughs, unrepentant.

"Wait, I want to hear this," says Max.

"It's exactly how it sounds," Mike says. "It was late October-ish, right around Halloween. Dustin was actually new at the time. Someone left a scone in the oven too long in the teacher's lounge and set off the alarm and the entire school had to evacuate, it was crazy. But then Dustin burst into these crazy noisy tears—"

"They were not noisy—"

"And he was in our class at the time, and everyone was laughing at him for crying. But Will went over to him and said it'd be okay, and they'd forget about it tomorrow."

"Aw, what! Will! That's so cute."

"It was whatever."

"We were so little back then," Dustin says. "Good days when all we had to cry about was the fire alarm."

"Well, what are you crying about now?"

"My hair. And my grades."

"I like how your hair supersedes the grades."

"Dustin has been so into hair care ever since Steve helped him exterminate his psycho pet."

“Lucas! His name was Dart.”

“May he rest in hell,” Lucas says.

“Remember when I first met you?”

Shuffling fills the silence in between Eleven’s question and the first person to answer. Mike, who lies on his back with his hands folded primly over his stomach, turns his head to look at her. She’s on her stomach, with her chin propped on the backs of her hands, in a pair of Mike’s old ringer tees that he doesn’t fit anymore.

“That’s one I want to hear,” Will says, encouraging.

“Yeah, me too.” Max’s red hair glows a dull amber even in the dim light of the nightlight.

“Mike, Dustin, Lucas.” Eleven traces a whorl in the hardwood floor with the tip of her finger. “Rain, lots of rain. It was cold.”

“I can’t believe none of us got sick from that night,” Dustin says.

“Shh!” Everyone shushes him so Eleven can speak.

“Sorry! Jesus. Floor is yours, El.”

“You ran from the lab that night, right El?”

Pertinent questions, however, are allowed. “Yes. Through the plumbing.”

“The plumbing?”

“A pipe. In the woods by Benny’s.” She traces the whorl with her nail now, *scritch scritch*. “He was a nice man. I’m sorry to him. I put him in danger. He would still be alive if I did not sneak into his kitchen.”

“No, El. No, you didn’t—”

“That is why I could not let you tell anyone about me,” Eleven says, cutting Mike off. “I saw and I knew that is what would happen.”

“But how did you find the three of them?”

“We ran over each other.”

“Into each other,” Mike corrects gently.

“We ran into each other. Will, they wanted to find him. In the woods. I heard them from far away, shouting loud. They had lights. I was scared in the beginning. Bad men, I thought. Run! But then when they got closer, I could tell their voices were like a child’s. Like mine. So I walked towards the lights. Dustin kept shouting about no weapons. That made it less scary.”

“You gave us the scare, though,” Lucas says.

Eleven laughs at this. “Yeah. Should have seen your faces.”

“What happened then?” asks Will. Mike feels a shade of guilt about the wistful quality in his voice, but then again, they never would have been out in the rainy woods after dark, and found Eleven, if he hadn’t gone missing.

“Mike told me get on a thing with two wheels. He called it a bike. He said we’d go to a place called home. Back here, in this place called home, they asked me lots of questions. I didn’t know many words back then. It was hard to answer them.”

“And you tried to disrobe in front of us!” Dustin shouts, clearly still traumatized.

“Mike told me to stay quiet in here and gave me Eggos. I love Eggos,” she reminds them all, in case they forgot.

“Wow. I wish I could’ve been there,” says Will.

“Me too, Will.”

“What did they do to you in that lab?” Max asks.

Mike eyes Eleven, who doesn’t answer right away. “Bad,” she whispers, sounding so much like the time Mike had first asked who was after her.

“Bad?”

“The monster,” Eleven says, then falls silent.

“I’m sorry, you don’t have to say. I was just curious, but really, you don’t have to tell us.”

“I am sorry too.”

A somber silence.

“Hey, but remember when Mike did a cartwheel once in second grade and split his chin open when he hit it on the edge of a desk?”

“Oh my *god*, I forgot about that—”

“Yeah! Holy shit! It was spurting everywhere—”

“Looked like something out of Carrie.”

“Did not!”

“Dude, you needed like, six stitches for that.”

“Whoa, what? Do you have a scar? Let me see!”

“No, what the hell—go back to your own sleeping bag, Max.”

Later—much later, after Dustin is the first to lose *Staying Up As Late As You Can*, and Will and Lucas and Max aren’t far behind, Eleven asks a question so softly that Mike thinks he dreams it.

“Do you?”

“Huh?” he says, voice thick with almost-sleep. “What?”

“Do you have a scar?”

“A scar? Oh, you mean on my chin?” He brings a hand out of his sleeping bag to run it over the underside of his jaw. “Yeah, a little bit. It’s really hard to see now, though, here—”

Mike takes one of her hands in his and pries her fingers open. They’re cold when he puts them against his skin, adjusting and readjusting until her fingertips meet the shiny groove where the skin had been

broken and stitched back together. "There," he says.

"Almost the same place as where the mouth-breather hurt you."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess."

"It is good."

"Good?"

"It's something I like, therefore, it is good."

"My scar?"

"It's you."

"Oh, you mean you like it because it's part of me?" Mike blushes when he belatedly realizes what 1) he said and that 2) Eleven's hand is still where he left it, resting on his throat. Unthinkingly smooth and now regretting it: A Saga by Michael Wheeler.

"Yeah."

"Uhm, thanks."

"You're welcome."

Mike clears his throat.

"Don't fidget. You move so much."

"Sorry."

Eleven smiles, but Mike can only tell because the light along the curve of her cheek bends.

She eventually retracts her hand. Mike finds that he misses it more than he lets on, enough for him to open his eyes at the loss of contact.

"Going to sleep?"

"No."

“No?”

“Not sleepy.”

“You’re stronger than us.”

“Thinking.”

“Oh, about what?”

“The lab.”

“The lab? What about it?”

“That time you told me to hide. In your closet, remember?”

Yes, vividly so. Mike remembers the panic of his mother getting back home and just barely keeping Eleven out of sight.

“Uh-huh.”

“When I was bad, Papa made me go to the metal room. A cell,” she adds, a touch of pride in her voice when she conjures the word all on her own. “For a long time. Every time.”

“Eleven—”

“Things I didn’t want to do, or could not do. He threw me in the cell. Two big men with big guns, actually, they would take me to the cell and throw me in. No one could see me. No one could hear me. Then they let me out when I was good again.”

“I hate him,” Mike says. A wad as thick and dry as cotton grows in his throat. “I hate him for what he did to you.”

“I know. Me too.”

“The water tank, then.” Mike recalls Hopper’s comment from over a year ago. “They’d lock you in that too?”

“I learned how to visit the void from there. It became useful.”

“But they,” it’s Mike’s turn to struggle for words, “that’s so

disgusting. It was scary, right?”

“Scary. Only because of the monster. Russians, not so much.”

“I wish I could have done something to help you.”

“Not possible.”

“But I still wish.”

“You told him to kill you if he wanted me back,” Eleven says, a yawn starting in her voice. “That is more than just help.”

“I thought you were out cold for that!”

“I heard,” says Eleven, because of course she did. She will always hear, and know, and understand.

“Fat lot of good that did, anyway,” Mike says. “We lost you. We couldn’t save you even when we were there. Even when we tried.”

*There’s nothing for you back there, they cannot save you Jane!*

“That’s right.”

“Yeah?”

“You tried. That is the difference. You tried.”

*No. But I can save them.*

“El—”

“Don’t cry. You look funny when you do.”

Mike laughs even as he feels the tears pool in the corners of his eyes. They dampen the pillow where they fall, worming their way across the bridge of his nose, down his temple.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“No. Thank you.”

*Jane!*

“For what?”

“For being stupid and looking for Will. But finding me instead.”

“Hey, we weren’t stupid! We were trying to help.”

“Hopper says we should not be stupid.”

“Hopper, in my opinion, can be quite stupid himself.”

“I agree,” Eleven says, and they laugh, trying to keep their snickering down to a bare minimum, Will is such a light sleeper lately. Mike feels himself being carried off to sleep just as the morning starts to dawn outside of the curtains, a cold, icy blue around the fabric, and he feels Eleven curl up into a ball beside him.

*You’re right. But saving them will give me a purpose. Saving them is gonna save me.*

“Night, El.”

“Night, Mike.”

The world goes from a soft, warm blue to a harsh white.

“Up and at ’em, folks! Get outta here! Don’t want to see you back until the sun goes down. That means no visiting and no hanging around outside!”

“Mornin’.”

“Morning.”

Old Man McKinley shuffles past just as lumpy and grey as the night before. Thirteen yawns, sits up on his thin blanket, and wonders how far he’ll be able to get on the paltry dinner he’d managed to get bits of last night. A spoonful of split pea soup and some sourdough.

“Yeh takin’ off for the day?”

“Mm.”

“Young kid like you, yeh can walk far. Go to the nice places.”

Indianapolis to Hawkins is a bit of a trek and a bus ride. “Mhm.”

“Yeh still trying to find yeh father?”

He shrugs.

“Fuck him, yeh know? If he’s lettin’ yeh suffer alone like this, yeh better off without yer old man.”

“Maybe.”

“Where yeh been lookin’? I can keep an eye out for his ugly mug.”

Thirteen eyes Old McKinley’s grizzled face. “Hawkins.”

“Hawkins? What the hell yeh goin’ all the way o’er there for?”

“Dunno.”

“Small town sort o’ guy, yeh father? Can’t imagine a decorated war vet hangin’ out in a town the size of my left ba—”

“McKinley! What the hell did I say? Scram! We don’t want to see hide nor hair of any of you till it’s dark outside.”

“I’m goin’ ma’am! I’m goin’! Jesus,” he says. “Well, I best be hittin’ the road. You take care o’ yehself now—what was yeh name?”

Thirteen shrugs.

Old McKinley shrugs back. “That was the name yeh mam give yeh?”

“I guess.”

“Yeh take care out there then, Shruggrins.”

The sky is overcast when Thirteen makes it outside. He only does

make it about three steps off the porch of the homeless shelter when he loses feeling in his fingers and toes, and the surroundings of Indianapolis vanish only to be replaced with whiteness. An off-white. It dances around his arms when he reaches out.

And then—something dark. Something huge. It whizzes by him, a huge, misshapen form in the fog, and then busy Indianapolis slams back down over his eyes.

“Move,” someone says, brushing past him.

His nose is bleeding.

“So, an accident on Smith, another on Westers, and—where?”

“Smith, Westers, Cornwallis, Alder, and Jackson,” Steve rattles off. “Some gnarlier than others.”

Hopper’s face meets his hands as he groans. “Harrington.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Chief. Yes, Chief. We’re not strangers.”

“Yes, Chief.”

“I have something very important to tell you.”

“Shoot, Chief.”

“And that’s when you work in public service in a place with a low crime rate where nothing happens, except a good old extra-dimensional invasion to keep you on your toes, you will have to deal with some astoundingly stupid people.”

“Chief?” asks Steve, halfway between disbelief and laughter.

“I know who the Westers collision was. It was Eleanor Gillespie. I asked her what she was doing out when the news has made it clear

that people should stay inside unless absolutely necessary. You know what she said?"

"Not the faintest, Chief."

"I wanted donuts."

Steve pulls a face of thought. "That's fair," he concludes.

"Harrington, please."

"Stupid."

"Yes, stupid."

Steve appraises the traffic reports in his lap, then leans back to see if anyone is loitering around the entry to Jim's office. No one.

"You don't think this is any of the weird shit from that lab, do you?" asks Steve, voice low.

"I would have to be a fool not to consider it."

"But the lab was closed for investigation, right? You think they could pull this shit off and get away with it?"

"I wouldn't say it's the lab, per se. You're right. I don't know if they'd be capable of something this scale. The lab was nothing but a portal. The Upside Down, maybe."

"But Eleven closed the gate, didn't she?"

"Yeah. Saw it with my own eyes."

"So it can't be the Upside Down."

"Gates can be reopened, Harrington, ever used a door? Not rocket science."

"But an interdimensional door? I don't know, Chief. It sounds like it took a fuckton of work to get it open the first time. It took a whole team of insane brainiacs and a superpowered kid."

"If there's an Eleven, what makes you think there aren't others?"

"Ones who'd willingly open it?"

"Not willingly. Accidentally."

"I don't know, Chief."

"Fair enough. Doesn't matter. Theory still stands. Remember when they expelled the monster from the Byers kid?"

"Who, Will? Yeah, why?"

Jim leans forward on his elbows. The wood of his desk groans beneath his weight.

"Where do you think that monster could have gone?"

This is Joyce's third consecutive cigarette.

"Mom, are you watching?"

She snaps out of her nicotine trance and turns to Jonathan, who is very concerned that his mother enjoys *Raiders of the Lost Ark* as much he does. Getting their hands on this tape was a three-week combined effort. It's not very convincing, but she gives him her best shot at a smile.

"Yeah, of course."

But try as she might, Joyce can't find it in her to focus.

It's the anniversary of Bob's death today. The seventh month, anyway. Joyce has stopped crying. Jim had, infuriatingly, been right about these things, though Joyce knew he couldn't have lied about it. It gets easier with the days. It never goes away, *it* being the chill of loss. Her own personal shadow monster. But as the summer deepens into a rolling boil, the chill feels farther and farther away.

Still, she visits his grave on the anniversary of every month. Just to leave some flowers and tell him how the boys have been doing. All of them: Will, Jonathan, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin. Max, of course. And Eleven—a girl that Bob had the misfortune of never meeting but one that he would have loved, even for her quirky silence and off-putting fashion of social interaction. The girl that made his sacrifice worth it. The girl that had saved them all.

But the fog is simply too dangerous to navigate alone. Hopper had warned her not to go out, no matter the circumstances, and he could come over with Eleven in tow so her house was a little fuller that day if the fog provided.

The phone rings.

“No, keep watching!” she says, when Jonathan moves to pause the movie. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about me.” Joyce stabs the cigarette out in the dish on the counter. It’s a forest of butts. “Hello?”

“Joyce. You busy right now?”

Hopper’s voice is tired even through the static. “Yeah, why?” She casts a glance over to Jonathan on the couch and turns away.

“Another collision down by Kelling. Have to go take a traffic report. Looks like someone can’t follow directions as well as you.”

“Kelling?” That’s the street by the town cemetery.

“I know I told you to stay inside. But I have to go over there whether I like it or not, so if you want to come, well. The invite’s open.”

“Are you sure? I’d love to, but—I don’t want to—”

“Joyce.”

“Yeah.”

“Relax and get dressed. I’ll come over with Harrington in a quarter hour to get you.”

Joyce smiles at the hidden fondness in his voice when he says Steve’s

name. "How is he doing?"

"Fine. Pretty boy has got some real brains. He cares about people. Better at that than me."

He hangs up, before Joyce can point out to him he's driving out of his way for her.

"Jonathan, Jim's coming over to bring me to the cemetery. Do you want me to bring home pizza?"

"Yeah, sure," he says. "Why don't you bring some home for Will, I'll be getting him from the Wheelers later."

"Pepperoni for Will, chicken and sausage for you?"

"You are the best, Mom."

She waits out on the porch, under the rusted hooks where a porch swing once had hung. It's muggy, though the fog has canceled out the unbearable heat that had cooked Hawkins just a few weeks before.

A noise of crunching dirt and gravel travels through the fog.

"Hop?"

No answer. Joyce frowns.

"Jim?"

She startles when she hears the sound of bird's wings, beating the air beneath its feathers. Jesus. It is not 1984 anymore. She needs to relax.

"Jim!"

"Joyce."

Every hair on the back of Joyce's neck stands up.

It isn't Jim who answers. It's Bob's voice. Quiet, nearly inaudible, but unmistakably Bob.

“Bob?” she calls out. “Oh God, Bob—is that you?”

“Joyce.”

There it is again. The porch steps creak as she takes them down into the front yard. “Bob!”

He doesn’t answer her again. “Bob—yeah, I’m listening! Bob!”

“Joyce.”

“Yes!”

“Joyce—Joyce!”

She yelps and jumps out of her skin when hands grab her, but they’re secure, warm, not crushing. It’s Jim, for real this time. “Joyce, what are you doing?”

“I thought—I heard him, Jim, I heard—”

“Heard who?”

“Bob, I—I swear, it was his voice. I swear. I’m not making this up. Please, you have to believe me. After everything, you have to.”

“Are you sure it was him? Not some sick joke?”

“Yes!”

Jim’s face darkens. “Get in the car—in the back. Harrington’s in shotgun.”

“Hi, Mrs. Byers,” Steve says as she climbs into the backseat. She is still shaking all over.

“Steve, how are you?”

“Couldn’t be better. How’s Will?”

“Good, good,” she says, distracted. “How did you guys get here through this fog?”

“Patience and good floodlights.”

“Okay. I have a pretty good sense of how to get to Kelling from here, but help me out, Harrington.”

The fog looks denser than it had yesterday, if that’s even possible. It blankets Hawkins in cloudy gloom. Joyce sits and stares out of the window, miserable, and not entirely sure why.

“Joyce?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you see anything?”

“No, I didn’t.” She wrings her hands. “I only heard his voice.”

“Whose voice, Mrs. Byers?”

Hopper’s jaw is set, a hard line. He looks straight ahead, and she does not answer.

The cemetery sign is a grey specter in the white. It hangs like a ghost in the mist and the words aren’t legible until they pull right up to it. Joyce climbs out of the truck and smiles weakly when Harrington slams the door behind her.

Jim Hopper has a bad feeling about this. He isn’t sure if it’s intuition or anxiety. It feels like a mix of both and he is frustrated that he cannot find the line where one ends and the other begins. He doesn’t like uncertainty; he finds comfort in knowing.

“Stay close, Mrs. Byers. Have a flashlight.”

“Thank you, Steve.”

“I don’t see a collision, Chief.”

“Would be impressed if you could see anything in this. Hello?”

His voice echoes slightly around them.

“This is the police. I was called with regards to a traffic accident here on Kelling. Is there anyone that requires help?”

No answer. Jim can feel Harrington glance at him out of the corner of his eye.

“I don’t hear anything, Chief.”

“Whatever. Kelling circles around the hillside. They might be on the other end. We’ll have to pass through to survey the entire area.”

“I didn’t bring flowers.”

“What?” Jim asks.

“I usually bring flowers. It’s okay, it doesn’t—it doesn’t matter, it just feels weird coming empty-handed. It’s too risky to stop by the florist anyway.”

“Here, hold this, Mrs. Byers.”

“What—?”

“Hold my flashlight.”

“Harrington!”

“Relax, Chief. I know I’m a deputy in training and all, but what’s a couple of geraniums, right?” says Steve, all while snapping some blooms off the nicely pruned bushes near the open gates. He holds them out, a little droopy, but good.

“I almost forgive you for putting a monster dog in my fridge.”

“Gotta keep trying every day!”

Bob’s grave is on the far side of the cemetery, near a downslope of grass that always is covered in daisies. It’s no easy trek by any means. Walking past the headstones of people past and gone should be eerie, especially in fog like this, but it isn’t. An odd kind of serenity

blankets this space.

“You keep it so nice and clean, Mrs. Byers.”

The headstone isn't anything special. Bob's family had paid for it, but Joyce does most of the housekeeping, brushing away dead leaves and moss when she visit. *Robert Newby, Beloved Son & Brother. 1943-1984.*

“Do you ever talk to him?”

“Uhm, yeah.”

“Should we?”

“Sure. Okay.”

Jim fidgets. He hasn't spoken to a—well, a grave since the first death anniversary of Sara. But it would probably mean a great deal to Joyce, so he tries to rustle up something to say.

Harrington clears his throat. “Dear Mr. Newby, I never really met you. But I've heard a lot of stories about you. That's kinda how things go with these kids, huh? Half of us aren't around for some of the best parts of the story. Or the worst. And thank God for them. But more thanks to you, for saving the Chief's ass, and Mrs. Byers' ass, and all of us, really. Because we'd be totally lost without our best coaches. Uh, amen?”

He looks at Hopper. “I've never done this.”

“You did fine, Harrington.”

“Oh, good.”

“Well. Bob. Harrington kind of covered it for me.” He clears his throat in a single, sandpaper cough. “That night was a nightmare that still doesn't feel real. I never had the chance to thank you for the great sacrifice you made for us to make sure we got out of there. It's not a debt that can be repaid easily. But I'm still here, and I'm still kicking, so I assure you your sacrifice hasn't been in vain. And as long as I'm here, I'll be protecting the kids and Joyce and Hawkins. I wish you could have met Eleven.”

Joyce slips her hand into the crook of her elbow. The gesture is a small one but it warms him through his chest.

“Hope you’re doing okay, Bob.”

That is all she says. Jim suspects she’s done her share of talking about Will and Jonathan and what the kids have been up to in recent months already.

They stand together, quietly, in white gloom.

“Anyone? Someone!”

“Did you—”

“Someone, please!”

They run a bit like children. Joyce clings onto the back of Jim’s jacket and Harrington grab onto Joyce’s wrist so they all stay together as they slip-slide down the hillside to where the voice is coming from.

“Hello—this is the police chief. Do you need help?”

“There was an accident.” Finally, a dark, lumpy form takes shape in the fog, and a woman with a bloodied nose and lip stumbles towards them. She doesn’t look much older than Harrington himself. The hood of her Cadillac is steaming, crunched in where she’d hit a streetlamp. “There was—”

“Is it only you? Did anyone else leave to get help?”

“No, only me,” she says. Harrington takes his jacket off and drapes it over her. She’s shivering. “There was a girl, Chief—I saw her, I swerved to miss her. I don’t think I hit her but—she was right there, in the middle of the road, and then she was gone! I got back in my car because I was shaken, but then I was worried it would explode, so I could only get back out—Chief, I know what I saw, there was—”

“A girl, I know.” Harrington is already scribbling in his notepad. “What did she look like?” He hopes she doesn’t say anything like *young, curly hair, skinny* or he might lose his mind here and now.

“She was tall.” The woman swallows. “Red hair.”

“Long red hair?” Jim asks.

“No, no. Short. Done up. Had to be about his age,” she gestures to Steve. “Glasses, I think. I don’t know. I think.”

Jim’s mouth feels like cotton.

“Are you sure?”

“I—yes! No? I don’t know! She knew my name! That was the weirdest part!”

“What is your name?”

“Uh. Nanami.”

“Uh, Nanami”? So that’s not what you heard the girl with the red hair say?”

“No, she...”

“She?”

But the woman purportedly named Nanami gasps and cowers, and the three of them turn just in time to see a massive winged shape swoop low towards them. Jim has to hand it to his years in Vietnam for being fast enough to ready his rifle and fire a few rounds into it, and it makes a horrible screeching noise that reminds him all too much of the lab.

“What the hell was that? Demogorgon? They can’t fucking fly!”

“Get back to the car, all of you,” Jim orders, loading his gun with more bullets. “Now!”

It’s a mad dash across the hilly cemetery to get back to Jim’s truck. For someone who’d just met them, and who must have at least some injury after turning her car into a pretzel around a streetlamp, Nanami-but-probably-not-Nanami runs surprisingly fast. Not to mention with an uncanny ability to know exactly where his truck is.

They get in—Joyce in the back, Harrington in the front. Four sets of seatbelts click like warning shots around them.

“Okay, to get to the station from here, you’ll need to—”

“In a second, Harrington. Now, before we go,” Joyce squeaks when he points his revolver into the backseat at the woman’s nose. “Who are you?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa—Chief! She just—”

“Quiet, Harrington. I asked you a question.”

“Hop, please, she’s probably scared.”

The girl sets her jaw in defiance. “I told you.”

“Nanami, is it? What’s your last name? Is that what the girl with the red hair called you?”

She levels him with a gaze that Hopper feels like he’s seen somewhere.

“No.”

“Then what is your name!”

“One,” she spits. “My first name was One.”

Stunned silence. Then, Harrington, ever the dependable: “Holy shit.”

The morning is white and watery.

Eleven is already awake by the time Mike pries his eyes open. It feels as though he’d closed them seconds before. She has the side of her face pillowed on the back of her hand, watching as he comes to.

“Morning, El.”

“Morning, Mike.”

“D’you get any sleep?”

“Yeah. Some.”

“Are you still tired?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m so tired,” Mike says, yawning so hard his jaw cracks.

“Sleep more later.”

“Yeah, I’m really considering that.” He raises head to look around the basement. Everyone is still asleep.

“You woke up first?”

“Think so.”

“Why didn’t you go back to sleep? It’s early.”

“Watching you sleep.”

“Oh,” says Mike, unaware until this moment that you could blush so hard first thing in the morning. “Hope that was entertaining.”

“Very. Your eyeballs move a lot.”

“Must’ve been dreaming.”

“Was it a good dream?”

“It was a weird one?” Mike drops his voice to a quiet whisper when Dustin makes a gurgling noise in sleep and tosses. “My dreams are usually always weird. I dreamed that the demogorgon was character in Star Wars, except he was a good guy. I think? He was a friend of Wookiee’s. And you were there for some reason, except you weren’t you, and you were Princess Leia, she’s the one with the buns. And then I was flying the Millenium Falcon. Badly. But that part was pretty cool, I guess.”

“You were flying that thing?” She points at the grey slab of plastic in the corner.

“No, the real one! It’s way bigger.”

“So you were just Mike?”

“Uh. I guess if I were flying the Falcon, it would make me Han.”

“Is Han cool?”

“Yeah, he’s the coolest.”

“Do Han and Leia like each other?”

Eleven truly has a talent to make Mike’s nerd heart and romo heart both do the foxtrot at ten in the morning during summer break.

“Yeah,” he mumbles. “Yeah, they get married.”

“Married.” Eleven nods as if he’d just shared a very interesting scientific proposal with her and not revealed an extremely embarrassing dream. “I have read about married. But what is it exactly?”

Oh, sweet Jesus. “It’s, uhm. It’s kind of like a promise. A really big promise. A forever kind of promise.”

Eleven’s face brightens. She’s familiar with promises. “A big one?”

“Yeah. One you really, really can’t break. Or shouldn’t. Like, there are legal things if you do.”

“So why do people get married?”

Mike is Not Built for This. “Because they like each other. Or something. To...always protect and love each other, and gross stuff.”

His face puts forth a valiant attempt at becoming one with his pillow.

“It’s gross?”

“No, it’s—it’s a good thing. A great thing. A bunch of adults do it and

there's this big party for it and it's a huge deal, they're called weddings. Sometimes they break the promise anyway, but they try not to, I think."

"Oh."

"Yep."

"A forever kind of promise," Eleven repeats softly.

Her gaze is so intense that Mike finds himself simultaneously drowning in it and unable to meet it.

"I get you guys are trying to have your brownie meeting before the rest of us wake up," Max says, barely intelligible, "but, please. I'm trying to catch my last REM cycle of the day."

Eleven laughs into the palms of her hands.

"Are you hungry?"

"I am always hungry."

"You know what, I am too, recently," Mike says as he wiggles out of his sleeping bag. Summer sleepovers are nice—it's not as hard to get up and the floor doesn't feel like ice when he does. "You want breakfast?"

"Now?"

"Yeah, sure! Why not?"

The rest of the Party wakes up to Eleven and Mike working their way through a small mountain range of Eggos. Eleven is a fan of slathering hers in whip cream and Smuckers.

"You guys didn't even make eggs?" Lucas says.

"We got excited about Eggos."

"Oh my God. Where is your pan? I'm making eggs."

Okay, so Lucas and Will burn the first two batches of eggs slightly,

and the third is a little on the runnier side, but they dig in anyway. Mike offers a meek wave when his mother comes downstairs, undoubtedly roused by the smell of burnt egg.

“I didn’t want to wake you up!” he says defensively as she casts a weary look over the pan in the sink.

“No, it’s fine, honey. I’m just impressed you managed to make eggs stick to a nonstick pan.”

Everyone looks at Lucas.

“Will told me to leave them in longer!”

“Did not! You said we’d die of salmonella if you didn’t.”

“Okay, I did say that. You’ll thank me.”

The fog is still thick enough in the morning that parents have to come retrieve their groggy post-sleepover children from the Wheeler house. Jonathan is the first to show up, and Will bids them goodbye before climbing into the passenger seat. Then Max leaves. Then Lucas, then Dustin.

The house is quiet.

“You don’t have to help clean,” Mike says as Eleven follows him back to the basement. “My mom always makes me do it so I’m used—”

Eleven rolls her eyes. Then the rickety dining table slides across the floor, feet making a dull screech as it does, until it comes to a stop beneath the hanging lamp where it always is.

“Whoa. Did you—?”

“Easier, right?”

“Uh,” Mike says, brain flatlining. “You just—”

“Had to do this in Hopper’s cabin once. When I was grounded.”

“Grounded? What for?”

“For being stupid.”

“Stupid?” Mike picks up one of the mismatched chairs and carries it across the room to push under the table. “You?”

“Really stupid.”

“What’d you do?”

“We had a big fight. I threw stuff at him. I made the furniture fall. The windows broke. I still feel bad about it.”

“Supernatural fight, huh? Chief wouldn’t stand a chance. What’d he get so mad about?”

Eleven chuffs, like she’s laughing but isn’t sure if it should be something to laugh at.

“What?”

“I left the cabin.”

Mike straightens up from gathering the pillows strewn over the floor. “He got mad at you for leaving the cabin?”

“He said it wasn’t safe. So I wasn’t allowed to.”

“Because the bad men might get you.”

“Yeah. But I didn’t listen. I left.”

“Well,” Mike puts the pillows back on the couches. “Did you do anything interesting?”

*I don’t see any tricks. You’re just going around in a circle.*

“Yeah. I took a walk.”

“Through the woods?”

“It was a nice day.”

*If it’s so easy, you try it.*

*No!*

*Why not?*

*I don't know how!*

"And he got mad at you for just taking a walk in the woods where no one goes?"

"I," she says, trailing off. "I didn't just walk around in the woods."

"Where else did you go?"

"The school."

"The school?" Mike blinks, not understanding. Then, "Wait, my school? Hawkins Middle?"

She doesn't meet his eyes.

"You came to see me?"

"I saw you."

Mike's brain had been waterlogged from not sleep deprivation earlier and too many waffles, but it's presently going a million miles a minute. El had been at the school? To see him? How had no one noticed her? How had—?

"When was this? Like, when during the day?"

"Afternoon. No one was in the building anymore. I just walked around. Then I heard your voice. You were laughing at Max."

Usually it's Max laughing at Mike, so he comes up empty.

"What?"

"In the building where the Snow Ball was. The gym. She was skating around you."

*I don't know, it was just like a magnet, or something, pulling on my board. I know that sounds crazy.*

“You were there,” Mike says, and his voice comes out so full of wonder that Eleven looks up—as if she’s surprised, as if she’s shocked he’s not angry. “I thought I was crazy. I thought I was going absolutely crazy.”

“What?”

“Max said—Max said she felt someone pull on her board. And I ran out, thinking it might be you, and then immediately felt like an idiot for it. It was you, right? It was?”

“I was mad.”

“At Max?”

“No, not mad. Jealous. I feel bad about that too. But I was jealous. You were smiling at her. And I remembered when you’d smile at me like that. And it hurt. But it was more than just that. I saw Max and I saw her standing in the spot I used to stand in. I saw you happy. And I thought that maybe you really didn’t need me as much as I imagined.”

“That’s not true at all! Why didn’t you tell me you were there?” Mike asks desperately, knowing full well what the answer will be, but it’s a question he can’t help but ask.

“Because you were safe. I hated it. I just wanted to see you living and breathing in the real world, and not in the void. That was enough. I knew I might put you in danger, no matter how much I hated it. So I just looked at you and went.”

She glances at him out of the corner of her eye and busies herself with cleaning the D&D pieces. Mike is very still. “Sorry,” she says.

*Sorry*, she says, as if any of this has ever been her fault. As if any of this has ever been her fault, or as if Mike hadn’t chosen to take the girl in the yellow T-shirt home in the rain.

“Mike?”

He’s hugging her before he even realizes he’s crossed the basement and pulled her back against his chest. She turns her head to look at

him but he has his face in her shoulder. Her curls drag over his cheek.

“Mike.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. I should be. I should have looked harder for you. All I did was sit in here and cry to you over the Supercom.”

“You did it for three hundred and fifty three days. You did all you could. You don’t have to be sorry, either.”

He laughs into the fabric of her borrowed ringer tee. “I guess we’re even.”

“I guess we are.”

It’s probably not the soundest idea they’ve ever had, but Mike has to say that he is significantly less concerned about supernatural bullshit when he has an equally superpowered girlfriend. Plus, it’s kind of awkward to be in a house with his entire family and try to have alone time with Eleven. Mike still has nightmares about Holly running down the basement staircase right when Eleven had been about to kiss him, and she’d run away screaming, “Ew! Ew!”

Not that Mike hadn’t been that kid once, but still.

“You’ll have to tell me where to turn,” Mike says. His bike prop squeaks as he kicks it up and swings his leg over the bike seat. “I can’t see well in the fog, even if I’ve biked to your cabin a billion times from here.”

“I will. I’m good at navigation.”

The nice thing is, there isn’t a single car in the road. People must be heeding the warning to not drive, and to walk if they have to go outside, preferably with a companion. Eleven rests her head on Mike’s back and hums.

“What’ve you been listening to?”

“Some old song that Hop likes to play. I think it’s kind of sad.”

“Sad, huh?”

“Yeah, a little.”

His bike tires are quiet on the asphalt.

“Mike?”

“Hmm?”

“How long is forever, exactly?”

What? “Uh, I dunno. I guess for as long as you live.”

“So forever is an average of seventy to eighty years?”

“No, no,” Mike laughs. “But that does make sense.”

“Then how long is it?”

“Forever is—forever.” Mike struggles. How long is it, really? She poses a fair question. “You’re right, we do only live an average of seventy to eighty years. But forever is kind of like, this whole life. And the whole next one too, if there is one. And the one after that. No matter what happens. Like, even if the sky falls down or something. That’s forever.”

“Seems unrealistic.”

Mike snorts. “Yeah, not untrue.”

“Forever,” she says, tasting it now.

The cabin is harder to find once they’re on foot and walking through the woods to get to it, but they’re only about a hundred feet off to the right. Mike lugs the bike onto the porch and lowers the kickstand.

“I’m hungry again,” Eleven says. She makes a beeline for the kitchen area and pulls a bag of Lays out of the cabinet. Along with Eggos, they’re her new favorite food item.

“Hopper says this is also bad for me. You want some?”

"I love food that's terrible for you," Mike says, plunging his hands into greasy potato chip. "Cool. So did you want to watch—"

There's a crackle outside, like the snapping of a branch. They pause.

"You said there are a lot of squirrels here, right?"

Eleven peers outside into the thick, impenetrable haze.

"El?"

"Not a squirrel."

Then, a thud that sounds like something the size of a bear being swung against a tree trunk. The both of them stumble back. Their hands almost collide when they reach out for each other without taking their eyes off the window, but before their fingers can meet,

everything

comes

to a sudden

yet steady

stop.

No, it doesn't stop all the way.

Not

all

the way, not the way as if someone had hit a giant pause button to get up and grab some more snacks, or use the bathroom. Everything slows down until movement is miniscule. The turn of every wheel on a car snails. The ruby-throated hummingbird's wings are small, an iridescent lavender, with unblurred edges.

There is a dreamy sense to the edges of this reality. Mike cannot move even if he tried, though his brain feels waterlogged, like he's trying to run in a nightmare.

Then Thirteen is before them, perched in the open window. Blood streams from his nose and his eyes are bloodshot.

“Thirteen!”

“Should get away from the windows.”

“What—where did you—? You teleported? Can you teleport?”

“No.”

“What just happened?”

“He saw things in the fog,” says Eleven, nose bleeding as well. “You were in danger. Are you okay?”

“I think so.”

“Promise?”

Something in Mike’s chest twinges oddly when she asks him that.

“Yeah—promise.”

“What did you do, just now?” Mike asks.

“Time.”

“Time?”

“You stopped time,” Eleven says, eyes huge.

“No. I only slowed it down.”

“Can you stop it all the way?” Mike says. He’s awestruck in spite of himself.

“I have tried. It was difficult, and dangerous. So the most I do is slow it down.”

“Why’d you do it now?”

“You were in danger,” he says, befuddled. This question sounds

stupid to him.

“You just happened to be here?” Mike raises his eyebrows.

“I was on the outskirts of Cartersville when I realized.”

“That’s miles from here!”

“That’s why. The slowdown.” He wipes his nose on his arm, sleeve coming away streaked with crimson. “I was headed towards Hawkins because I think someone with blue hair will be here.”

“Blue hair? Why Hawkins?”

Thirteen shrugs. “Same reason I came to Hawkins first. Eleven’s power is the easiest to sense.”

Mike’s gaze bounces back and forth between Thirteen and Eleven, who wears an expression mixed confusion and flattery. Back is the twinge of annoyance.

“Why me?”

“Don’t know. Your power manifests very strong. Did something happen recently?”

“Kind of,” says Mike.

“The gate?”

“You saw that, huh.”

The door ricochets open that moment, and the three of them shriek in surprise and stumble away from the the entrance.

“Jesus fuck! Hopper!”

“Don’t ‘Jesus fuck, Hopper,’ me, Wheeler. This is my house. Who the hell is this?”

Hopper carries a gun. A rifle, really, hanging around his shoulder.

“I said, who the hell is this?” Hopper shouts, moving to raise his

weapon, and the three of them shuffle back some more.

“Wait! Hopper. He’s one of us.”

“Us?” Hopper barks. “Who the hell is us? He’s human?”

“One of me,” Eleven says, stepping in front of him. Mike and Thirteen both stare at her as she stretches her arms out. She has never put herself in the line of fire to defend another life and it is a position she fits well. Mike sees himself in her, young and full of fear but reckless all the same. “His name is Thirteen.”

Hopper’s gun clacks against the metal of his belt as he lowers it. “You’re joking.”

“No. Show him.”

Thirteen offers his wrist. Hopper grabs it, brusquely, so that Thirteen is yanked forward in his grip.

“Hop—”

“Who knows you’re here?”

“No one. No one is looking for me.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To look for her.” He points at Eleven.

“And what the hell do you want with El?”

“There is something coming that she cannot do alone,” Thirteen says with a haunting certainty. “We’ve come to help.”

“We, who’s we? You and One?”

“Me. One. Three. Five. Eight, Nine, Ten. And Twelve.”

If Mike is correct, that would make nine superpowered kids. His head spins.

“How do you know One?”

“Not important right now. We closed that gate last year,” Hopper counters, setting his gun down. “There shouldn’t be any more danger.”

“The Upside Down is not the only dimension beyond this one. Dimensions have allies. You have managed to anger a very powerful one.”

Hopper does not seem mad. Eleven thinks he looks more worried than mad. He’s not lecturing Mike for biking in the fog. He’s not even lecturing her for letting strangers into the house.

He looks worried and she doesn’t understand. Maybe she should? She usually does, but that’s because he’s often worried about her. But then she sees the girl in the back of his car. She is older, like Nancy. Maybe even older than that. She has long black hair with blue in it, which is cool. Very cool. Eleven wouldn’t mind having blue hair. It would be pretty bitchin’.

“El! If it isn’t my best girl. How are you? Good?”

Steve looks good in his police uniform. “Great. I haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“Yeah, I’m training hard. Your pops works me down to the bone.”

“He is like that.”

“Harrington. The girl.”

“Oh yeah. El, we wanted you to meet someone.” Steve beckons at somebody inside the car, and she can see Joyce. She waves. Joyce is her favorite, and she gives Eleven a tired smile and waves back. But the girl that walks around the back of the car is not Joyce at all. “Eleven. This is Nanami.”

“Nanami.” She’s Japanese. Eleven holds out her hand to shake. But Nanami looks from Eleven, to Mike, to Steve.

“Your name is Eleven?” Nanami asks.

“Usually El.”

Nanami slips her hand into Eleven’s. “Nice to meet you, El. My name is Nanami. But my old name was One.”

Steve supposes that this is his first real case, which is both exciting and also mind-blowingly scary. Hopper says this reminds him a lot of when Will had first disappeared, except they’re not looking to find a lost boy this time.

Callahan sits on one side of Hopper, Steve on the other. Lined up before them is a motley crew made up of Joyce, Mike, Eleven, Thirteen, and One, who says she really prefers being called Nanami. Or, “just Nami is fine.”

“Okay, you first,” Hopper says. “Nami. You.”

Her story is a sad one. She talks very fast, but with a surprising eloquence that Steve hasn’t heard in a while. The kids speak in firecracker yells and shouts, Hopper mostly grunts, but what Steve gathers is that her mother was taken from one of the Japanese internment camps in the early forties, being promised asylum at a lab where she would provide insight into human biology. Nami had been born in that lab.

Eleven squirms through a lot of it. Steve doesn’t miss the way Mike holds his hand open upon his thigh until she reaches over to take it.

“Where is your mother, do you know?”

“Died.”

“How can you be sure?” Eleven says, turning to her. She glances down at Eleven, and Hopper sighs and ducks his head. Steve wants to ask but recognizes it is a shitty time to.

“I saw her walking in a place beyond this one.”

"Is that your power, then?" asks Hopper. "You can see the dead?"

"I have three divisions of one supernatural ability, astral ability. Astral vision. Astral projection. Astral imprisonment."

"You're going to have to explain all of that in English, hon."

"She can see dimensions beyond this one, as long as they overlap with ours," Steve offers for the first one. Nami looks impressed.

"Yes, essentially."

"How on earth do you know that?" Hopper asks.

"I spend a lot of time with Dustin. A lot." Steve holds his hands about a foot apart. *This much*, he mouths.

"So can you see the Upside Down?" Mike asks, sitting up straight.

"Yes. I can choose to."

"Holy shit. I wish you'd been here like, two years earlier."

Eleven smiles softly.

"Astral projection is being able to leave my physical body behind. And astral imprisonment is being able to keep beings in certain dimensions that I choose."

And Steve had just gotten used to how dangerous Eleven could be if she so chose. A girl who could see other dimensions, leave her body, and fucking trap souls? Jesus Christ. He needs a cigarette or twenty.

"And you?" Hopper nods to the boy who called himself Thirteen. "You have a name besides Thirteen?"

He shrugs. This is more familiar.

"So you don't mind if we just call you Thirteen."

"Nah."

"What's your deal?"

“He can stop time,” Mike blurts. Everyone stares at him. “It’s true! There—there was something in the fog, and it sounded so close, but then it was gone and he was in the window and it felt so weird in the time before he was. He slowed it all the way down, long enough to remove whatever danger it was.”

“That true?” asks Hopper.

“Mike is generous. I cannot stop it. I can slow it down but move unaffected through slowed time. Chronokinesis, I believe it’s called.”

“He can see the future,” Eleven supplies.

“And he’s telepathic,” says Mike.

“Whoa, whoa, hold on. What am I thinking about?” Steve glares at Thirteen and mentally shouts really loud about how much he could go for a Coke and some fries right now. But Thirteen shakes his head.

“I cannot invade your thoughts. I can just—” The force of it knocks Steve back in his chair. Images explode across his field of vision—first of a place he doesn’t recognize, a toothless old man giving him a smile; then of a pristine, white-edged facility that looks fit for Petri dishes and certainly not for children; then of Mike and Eleven, dancing, laughing at something he can’t hear.

“Harrington!”

Steve shakes his head and the ceiling of the police department comes back to him. “Holy shit,” he says. “What the fuck was that?”

“What’d he show you?” Eleven asks.

“You. And Mike. And a hospital kind of place?”

“The lab.”

“And some old dude.”

“The homeless shelter.”

“Kid, you live in a homeless shelter?” Hopper leans forward with his

elbows on his knees. “Where are your folks?”

“Texas.”

“Texas,” Hopper says.

“My mother. That was the last place I saw her. I never met my father.”

“What’s their deal?”

“I left home one day to look for him. She told me she met him ‘during the war.’ Not leave, but I went outside. Some men in vans grabbed me and years later, after I got out, I went back to look for her the apartment we stayed in. It had been torn down. There’s a park now, where it had been.”

“War? Which one?”

“Don’t know.”

“Korean War?”

“Probably. The one after the Nazis.”

“Korean War.” Hopper sits back. He rubs his temples.

“You said you can see overlapping dimensions, right Nami?” Steve says, picking up where Hopper seems too overwhelmed to.

“Yeah.”

“And Thirteen, you said something about—I don’t know, like, us pissing off multiple dimensional monsters or some shit?”

“The Upside Down.”

“There is another one that I call The Darker,” Nami says, lacing her fingers together in her lap. “It’s a bit like the Upside Down. It’s not as slimy, or green, frankly. But it was not there until quite recently. I’m not sure why, exactly. Nor do I know how it has crossed lines with ours. But there are beasts in that world, too. Malevolent ones.”

“So you came—to Hawkins?”

“They were moving in this direction. I felt a pull coming from up north, you see, and it seemed like they did too. I live in Florida, with a family who I was fortunate enough to meet and call a family of my own. They didn’t understand why I needed so badly to come here, and I didn’t know why, either. I didn’t know what I’d be looking for. Just that I had to come.”

“Eleven.”

“Huh?”

Thirteen points to her, sitting in the middle of everyone. “You’re looking for her.”

Eleven looks around uncomfortably as they all stare. The phone jingles then, and Steve picks himself up to go answer it.

“Hello, Hawkins Police Station.”

“Hi, I’d like to speak to the chief, please.”

“He’s a little occupied right now. Can I take a message?” Steve pulls out the memo pad from his breast pocket.

“Yes. Please let him know Sam Owens called with an urgent matter and that he’ll see the chief at the diner by Melvald’s tonight at six for dinner.”

“I’m sorry, can I get a note of what you’re looking for him about? Chief’s pretty busy.”

“It’s about his daughter. Good day.”

The line goes dead.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

ost of the chapter is [time in a bottle - jim croce!](#)

big big homage to stephen king’s *the mist* with this

chapter, because that story basically could be the grandfather of stranger things (see: the whole interdimensional monster thing, the scene from season 1 where they pull back the bloody cable attached to shepard versus when they pull back the bloody rope attached to norm in the mist, etc)

anyway hope this is a ride so far, i'll work hard on ch 3!! ^^

### 3. the soul

#### Summary for the Chapter:

in the sleepy harvest city of hawkins, indiana, there is a sickness that has never healed.

#### Notes for the Chapter:

here's chapter 3!!

**content warnings:** one instance of a period-specific racial slur

Nancy has a spine that's gentle and serpentine. When she lies on her stomach her spine slopes into a soft valley at the small of her back. She's ticklish. Jonathan knows it and he still traces a line down the groove of her vertebrae with the tips of his fingers.

"What are you doing?" she mumbles. She turns her face in her pillow, eyes closing and opening slow as butterfly wings.

"I'll miss this if we ever make it to college."

Her expression is unreadable.

"I'll miss you," says Jonathan. "There isn't a Nancy Wheeler at NYU."

"If we? That's fatalistic of you."

"Not in a morbid way! Maybe we'll stay behind to work. Who knows, right?"

She hums. "There's no Jonathan Byers at Boston University, either," she says, smiles lazily. Her window is open, but the curtains are drawn; it's late afternoon. The fog outside makes for a wet, hazy week following a particularly hot one. Jonathan finds he can't complain. It made skin to skin contact unbearable. Now he can comfortably lie here and watch Nancy doze with the sheets pulled halfway up the length of her back without feeling like he's being pressure-cooked in a steamer.

“Probably for the better.”

Nancy opens her eyes in earnest. “Why?”

“There’ll be plenty of richer, better-looking bachelors in Boston. Not to mention they don’t get involved in supernatural bullshit every year to put your life in danger.”

She’s frowning now. Okay, bad sign. Good going, Jonathan.

“Jonathan, you know that’s not true.”

“Not true there’ll be good looking bachelors in Boston?”

“What? No, I mean—” She sits up. “Just because they’re richer doesn’t mean anything to me. You know that, right? It hardly means anything to me at all. Not to mention,” a laugh here, “so much of my life in the last two years has been ruled by the appearance and disappearance and reappearance of people I care about, or learned to care about. How could I ever expect to explain that to someone?”

“Not your usual case of baggage, huh.”

“No, not at all.”

“And through all of it, you have been there.” She lies back down and rests her cheek in the crook of his outstretched arm. “Through Barb. Through losing people. Through finding your brother, and Eleven again. And for a while I thought I lost my brother, too. And you were here for all the times it felt like my family was falling apart.”

“Like the world’s gonna end.”

Nancy smiles. It’s a real one. “And it never seems to when I’m with you.”

Lately it’s been easier for them to have late-afternoon tumbles in the sheets. Nancy gives a wordless thanks to Mike for getting a girlfriend (she’s not sure if he’s even asked her out formally or used that word in front of their mother, but Karen Wheeler is also not an idiot) because lately their mom is a lot more concerned with her son being a gentleman to the police chief’s daughter than she is with her

daughter dating long-time family friend Jonathan Byers.

"I'm scared to go when things look like this," Jonathan says. "Even if, logically, I know things will work out by then."

"Yeah. It's weird. I don't want my brother to be in danger again. Yet again."

Jonathan purses his lips.

"And I don't want to—not be here, if anything happens to Eleven."

"Nothing will happen to El. You've seen what she can do."

"I know, of course. Yeah. Sorry."

"No, don't be. I worry about my mom and Will a ton. I've been around Will so much more in the last two years than I have his whole life, which was already a lot."

Nancy blows a breath out of her nose. It's supposed to be a laugh. "And people our age are supposed to be excited to leave the nest."

"I've never been excited to."

"I guess we're not a whole lot like people our age."

"Not at all."

But Jonathan does not say what has been in the back of his mind for the last several days, lurking in the recesses of his brain, an unwelcome ghost. He has a bad feeling, not the kind where he is worried something will happen. No, he knows something is going to happen.

It's just the question of when that bothers him most.

Mike will admit it: he feels mind-numbingly ordinary when he's around Eleven, Nanami, and Thirteen.

Between having a telekinetic girlfriend to meeting a chronokinetic

time bomb and a girl who can literally leave her body, Mike's greatest talent to date is reciting the entire periodic table by memory along with the atomic numbers and all the atomic weights up to cadmium. He felt pretty good about that until Thirteen made a point of slowing down time enough to get up, leave the room in the Motel 8 that Nami had booked, walk to Big Buy, and walk back with a box of Jell-O pudding pops before a full second had even passed.

"So how did you meet?"

"Huh?"

Nami points her pudding pop at Mike, then Eleven. "You guys."

"Oh, well, uh—"

"Mike saved my life."

Nami raises her eyebrows. In the weak afternoon light, her tattoo comes up faded and grey on her wrist. "You did?"

"He was there the night I escaped."

This is enough to make Nami stop eating. "Escaped?"

"What, you didn't?" says Mike.

"No. I was let go."

"What?" Eleven sounds uncomprehending of this. "You were let go? You were set free?"

"I was thrown out, more accurately, but yes. I was deemed a waste of time and money and the doctor decided that he was more interested in his other toys. I was put in clothes too big and too small and told that we were to play a game—that I would walk so far that I couldn't find my way back, and that they'd come find me. They never did. But the fear that they would kept my mouth shut for years."

She says this all very measuredly, like she's talked about it time upon time again. There is no embittered tang to her words.

“So you never told anyone about the lab?” Mike says.

“By the time I understood well enough what I had suffered was inhumane and unspeakable, it had already become a part of my past that I did not want to confront again,” Nami says. “My family—they are lovely people—know that I suffered abuse from a young age. They’re not wrong, per se. But they think it was from being in the system. They don’t know the true nature of it.”

“The system?” asks Eleven.

“Foster care,” Mike says. She turns to him, half understanding. “Sometimes kids are left behind. So they go into ‘the system,’ it’s like this big set up for people who will take care of kids that aren’t theirs. Until they grow up, kind of.”

“An almost family,” Eleven says.

“An almost family,” Mike repeats.

“So you ran?” Nami says. “How?”

“Chaos. During chaos.” Eleven takes Mike’s hand into both of her own. She doesn’t hold it, exactly, but she spread it out against her knee, turns it over in her palms, fiddles with his fingers. As much as she likes to tease him for fidgeting, she is calmest when Mike lays his hand in hers and allows her to do as she pleases with it. “The lab fell apart where I was. All the doctors and scientists fled, in fear. Papa tried to get me out of the deprivation tank but I was already gone when it collapsed.”

“Papa? Who’s Papa?”

Eleven chews on her lip.

“This tall, old man,” Mike says. “One of the scientists. He has white hair and is a total fucking psycho freak.”

“The Doctor.” Nami grimaces. “You called him Papa?”

“What did you call him?”

“The Doctor.”

“I called him Father.”

Mike finds himself turning to stare at Thirteen as Eleven and Nami do.

“That is sick,” Nami says after a beat of silence.

“Tell me about it,” Thirteen says. “He must have started it with all the kids after Kali. Eight.”

“God.” Nami wraps her pudding pop stick back into the gooey wrapper. “That makes it infinitely worse. I thought it was bad enough for me and Two, but at least we kept him at an arm’s length calling him The Doctor.”

“Like Doctor Who?” Mike says.

Nami snorts. “Yeah, it does sound stupid, doesn’t it? But, I didn’t get a chance to ask—what kind of chaos was great enough for you to get away, El?”

She clenches both her hands around Mike’s fingers, his index and middle in one, and his ring and pinky in another.

“It was by accident. I—a gate. The Upside Down. I opened it. It opened right there, in the lab. It destroyed the entire floor.”

“Wait.” Nami leans forward. “You opened that?”

Eleven blinks. “Yeah?”

“No way. Really? How long ago—about two years ago?”

“Two years ago,” Eleven says. “Why—?”

“The Upside Down was never visible to me until two years ago. And dimensions are, well, they’re a little like asteroids, or space debris, they don’t really follow a certain orbit. Sometimes a dimension will perfectly align with ours out of chance. Happens more often than you think. But usually it moves out of alignment again, and I can’t see it

anymore.” She sits back on her heels, leaning to toss her popsicle stick in the trash.

“How many have you seen?”

“What, dimensions? Plenty. But there are—okay, dimension lesson number zero-zero-one.” The three of them lean in towards Nami. “There are four dimensions in perfect alignment with ours.”

“Four?” Mike says, vague alarm coloring his voice.

“Yeah, four. In perfect alignment, mind you. I can’t see them as clearly if they’re not. There’s this one, reality. Then there’s the afterlife, which is simple enough. Dead people.” She ticks off her fingers. “The Upside Down. The Darker. And the last one is Limbo.”

“Limbo?” A chorus of confusion this time.

“Wait, you need to explain what the hell The Darker is, first,” Mike says. “You said you couldn’t see it until recently, right? What made it open up?”

“Can’t say, can I? I didn’t even know Eleven opened the Upside Down—though that terminology is kind of wrong, dimensions don’t open. They’re already there. They’re just not congruent enough with ours for me to see it.”

“What does it take?” says Thirteen.

Nami makes a noise of thought. “You ever heard about Thor?”

“Who’s Thor?” Thirteen.

“I know Thor! He’s not as cool as Iron Man, or Captain America, in my opinion, but—” Mike.

“A Norse god.” Eleven.

“Yeah, okay,” says Nami over the din. “So, Thor, right, he’s a god. Only he’s capable of wielding this big hammer, by the way, Thirteen. It’s too heavy. No one else can pick it up. So, now imagine that his hammer is the center of gravity for that dimension. You get why it’s

too heavy for anyone else, right? The weight he wields isn't the weight of the hammer, it's the weight of the dimension."

"I think I get it," Mike says.

"Yeah, it's not too crazy, right? So aligning two dimensions usually means that the centers of each have aligned. It happens by chance. That's why I'm shocked, El. You basically yanked another dimension's center of gravity to meet this one."

Thirteen is staring at Eleven with a mixture of fear and admiration and Mike can't say he disagrees.

"I did not do anything that cool."

"No?" Nami reaches for another pudding pop. "More than I've done."

"What do you usually do with your power, then?"

She puts on a great show of thinking, scratching at a spot behind her earlobe. It makes her earrings jingle, *clink-clink*. "Usually spy on bitches I hate and blackmail them."

"What!" Mike laughs. "Are you serious?"

"That asshole Marie sure regretted calling me a dirty Jap after I figured out her routine and rubbed poison ivy all over her souped up leather seats," Nami says, and the three of them explode into disbelieving laughter. "Don't be like me, kids."

"Max would approve," Eleven says.

"Max?"

"Friend. You remind me of her."

"Well, Thirteen can slow down time. What do you do with that, usually?" Mike says.

"Sleep."

"Sleep?"

“Sleep in,” Thirteen says.

“Wait, I’m actually so jealous,” Nami says. “Time passes for you but not for anyone else?”

A sort of shit-eating grin starts to spread over Thirteen’s face, and it’s the first look of mischief Mike’s seen on him. It suits him well. He gets a feeling that Thirteen would be made for pranks and the like if not for his upbringing. “So it would seem.”

“Not fair at all! You’re like, what, twelve? You don’t even need to sleep in.”

“I am fifteen,” Thirteen insists.

“Yeah, same thing.”

“Is not!” Mike says. “That’s three whole years. I was a complete idiot when I was twelve. I would smack twelve-year-old me.”

“I met you when we were twelve,” says Eleven, turning to look at him. “You were not an idiot.”

Nami raises her eyebrows and half-rolls her eyes at the floor in the universal gesture of *okay, sounds fake, but okay*.

“Thanks, El.”

Thirteen and Nami see them off before sunset, and before it gets too dark to see through the fog. Eleven has a pair of magenta tights on under her shorts today, so fluorescent that Thirteen can still see them fading even some fifteen feet into the mist.

“You don’t think that Mike is one of us, do you?”

Thirteen turns to her. “Why?”

Nami scratches behind her ear again. “There’s something curious about them.”

“What? Can you see something?”

But Nami only shrugs.

“Maybe I’m just imagining it.”

The juxtaposition of Jim walking into Birdie’s Diner to meet with Sam Owens this evening, as compared to the time he’d walked in a month after the closing of the gate, is stark. The first time had been relief. Now, it’s dread.

Owens wears his usual demeanor of serenity, reading a newspaper with a pair of bifocals perched on his nose. He’s thinner than when Jim saw him last. Recovery from such a traumatic muscle injury at his age seems to have taken somewhat of a toll.

“Owens.”

“Chief-O! You look good. How’s late fatherhood?”

“Terrible, thanks for asking.” Jim throws down his hat on the table as Owens folds up his newspaper and sets it in the empty booth seat beside himself.

“Daughters are easy. It’s the sons that are pains in the ass.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I’d know. Two sons and one daughter. Angel of a girl. Even when she wants to act up she doesn’t destroy the furniture.”

Jim snorts. “Oh, you think El—Jane isn’t capable of destroying furniture?”

“Poor foresight on my part.”

Their waitress comes by to take their orders. Usual BLT for Owens, spaghetti for Jim. Owens laces his fingers together on the table when she walks away.

“But I don’t imagine you came here to give me any dad-to-dad tips.”

“Sadly, I could give those to you over the phone.”

“You told my deputy it was about my daughter. Which one?”

“The living one. No worries.”

“Now I’m worrying a lot more.”

Owens gathers his words. “Have you gotten any wind about the person who raised her?”

The blood in Hopper’s hands goes cold. “No. What—the one before you?”

“That would be the one.” They fall quiet as their waitress sets down Owens’ sandwich in front him. “No news at all?”

“Shit, Doc, I don’t know. You tell me. Don’t you doctors all know each other?”

“Even if I did know him, you think he’d like me? I took over his work and made it humane.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Jim reaches for his fork when his spaghetti is served up and he thanks the waitress as she sets down a Coke in front of him, too.

“Enjoy,” she says. She gives him a coy smile as she walks away.

Owens levels him a Look over his sandwich.

“You didn’t sleep with the Birdie’s waitress.”

“I...sincerely hope not, but I might have.”

“Christ,” Owens shakes his head. “Anyway, so the doctor. There’s evidence enough to believe he’s alive.”

Hopper chokes on a meatball.

“I thought that son of a bitch—didn’t he get mauled by that thing? From the—” He lowers his voice. “Upside Down.”

“Bodies, Chief. What have we learned about bodies in the past two years? We don’t believe someone is dead until we see that corpse.”

Hopper takes in a breath from his nose. “Okay, fine. Say he is alive. What’s it mean for us?”

“Maybe nothing. But I found this in the paper the other day. Didn’t even occur to me to pay attention to it at first.” Owens extracts a single clipping from the folds of his newspaper and slides it across the table. It’s no bigger than a credit card.

*Hospital Inpatient Still Missing* reads the headline. Hopper gives Owens a look of skepticism before continuing.

*The search continues for a missing patient of senior age who disappeared from his hospital room at Indianapolis General Hospital between the hours of 6:00 AM and 8:00 AM late last year, reports hospital staff. Tall build, elderly, likely with signs of recent injury. Please contact your local police immediately if you have seen or heard any information or would like to help.*

“Could be anyone.”

“Sure. That’s why I said maybe nothing. I told myself I was fixating too much, but late last year? What if it had been around November?”

“When we closed the gate.”

“And why then, too.”

Hopper drags his hands over his face.

“I’m fucking tired of this, Doc.”

“I would be too.”

“I don’t want the kid to be in danger every year.”

“She’s got you now, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, I mean,” Jim picks at his food. “Thanks, but I’m just one person.”

“Then who’s that?”

Owens nods at something over Hopper’s shoulder, and he turns to see what he means. The bell on the door handle jingles merrily as it opens, and Eleven steps inside with Mike in tow. She’s smiling.

“What the hell,” Jim says, turning around and hunching so low in his booth he almost faceplants in his spaghetti. “What the hell are they doing here?”

“I believe that is called a *date*, Chief.” Owens is having way too much fun watching them over his BLT. “Oh, what a gentleman. Mr. Wheeler, am I right? The child who’s friends with Will Byers. They’re sitting at the bar now.”

“This is terrible,” Hopper says. “I told them to go home.”

“Oh, come on, Chief-O. You should be happy for her. Don’t act like you weren’t sneaking around at their age, too.”

“I wasn’t the object of constant criminal interest, was I? Jesus fucking Christ,” Jim hisses.

“Probably not.” Owens pops the last bit of this half of his sandwich into his mouth and reaches for the second. “But you were no superpowered kid, either.”

Will has spent a lot of his time in the last two years getting scared shitless, so you’d think he’d start getting used to it by now. Spoiler alert: he hasn’t.

It’s not really his fault. He gets home from Mike’s house, bids a sleepy hello to Jonathan on the couch, and decides another nap is order. The next time he’s opening his eyes it’s already dark out, and he can hear the murmuring of his mother down the hall.

His bed creaks as he rolls over and switches on his lamp.

“Holy shit!”

“Will? Are you awake?”

“Y-yeah, sorry! I just fell off my bed!”

Thirteen arches one eyebrow from the foot of Will’s bed. He has no fucking clue how long he’s been there, but he must have been sitting still enough for Will not to wake up.

“I don’t know if you’re really in the position to be giving me that expression, considering you’re in my room, sitting on my bed—how did you even get in here?”

“Slowly,” Thirteen says.

Will sighs. “Can you just get out of my room? This is weird.”

“I’m sorry,” Thirteen says immediately. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Well, you did.”

“Didn’t mean to.”

Will shimmies upright in bed until he’s leaning back against the headboard. He feels a little vulnerable in his thin PJ shirt, so he crosses his arms. Better. “Okay, if you won’t leave, then you’ll talk. Why are you looking for me?”

“I need to know about Eleven.”

“Shouldn’t you just ask Eleven, then? She can talk, you know.”

“The two of us, we’re,” Thirteen gestures uselessly. “Too alike.”

“How’s that?”

“Raised in a lab. Never learned to read. Did not understand anything about the outside world. We talk funny. A little different from everyone else. I can show her things, but I don’t want her to tell me things she does not want to say. But some things I need to know.”

“Then you should ask Mike. He’s the one who—she’s his girlfriend.”

Thirteen quirks one side of his mouth. “Don’t think Mike likes me

very much.”

“What? No, I doubt that. Mike is nice is everyone. Well, almost everyone. And he’s not really good at hiding how much he dislikes someone.”

“Almost everyone?”

“He used to dislike Max a lot. It’s kind of a long story. Why do you even think that?”

“Nami said his soul is the same color as mine.”

Will holds his hands up. “Wait, who? Who’s Nami? Soul, what soul?”

Thirteen talks with his hands a lot, the way Eleven speaks with her eyes a lot. He doesn’t seem to enjoy looking Will in the face very much, which Will is A-okay with. Thirteen has a gaze so piercing it feels hard to meet directly. And as far as explaining things goes, Thirteen has the same stilted way of speaking as Eleven. Lucky for Will he’s had a lot of practice with her speech pattern.

“One. One of us, but One. Like me, Thirteen, and Eleven. She’s One. But she’s Nanami now. Just Nami.”

“Like Kali?”

“Who is Kali?”

“Eight, I think. That’s what El told us.”

“I see.”

“One—this, Nami, she can see souls?”

Thirteen nods. “And their colors.”

“So that’s her power. Like El, who’s telekinetic.”

“Soul watcher.”

“What color’s Mike’s soul?” Will asks out of curiosity.

“Blue.”

Somehow he'd been expecting a fancier answer. “Blue?”

“Mhm.”

“And yours is too?”

“I guess so.”

“Damn. I wonder what mine is,” says Will.

What Will gathers of Nami makes her sound like a Soul Warden, except probably more insidious, and a lot scarier. He had been impressed by Eleven when he'd first and finally been given a proper introduction to her (“Will, this is Eleven. Eleven, you know Will already. You remember El, right Will? We told you about her, she's the one who talked to you in the Upside Down last year.” “Hello Will. You are very strong.” “Oh, uh. Thanks, El.”) and now, after learning about her and meeting Thirteen, Will is afraid to wonder what the others might be able to do.

“You can ask sometime.”

“Will? Are you hungry?”

“Uh—no, Mom! I'm still a little sleepy.”

“Okay, get your rest, sweets.”

Will relaxes back into his pillows. “You said you're like El. But I don't really know that much about her, either. I know some stuff, from what the Party's told me, but you probably mean something different, I'm guessing.”

Thirteen wrings his hands in his lap. He looks Will square in the face. “Can I show you?”

Will winces, remembering Eleven's nosebleed. “Is it going to hurt?”

“Might just hit you a little hard,” Thirteen says, quirking up one side of his mouth. He's never smiled in front of Will before, and it's almost

a startling expression on him.

“Okay.” Will steels himself. “Hit me.”

The images really do feel like a physical blow to the head—not so much painful as they are forceful, like hitting the surface of the water a little too hard doing a cannonball into the pool.

First there is darkness. Then blurry images of the outside world and a woman with black hair, then a frigid, white-edged facility made up of tiles and glass. A tall man, with a smile that’s all gentle warmth and reassurance—or so it seems. There’s an odd glint in his eyes even as he leans down to cup Will’s face, yet just before he can, he blurs in favor of an image of a doctor holding up a pair of receptacles. “This won’t hurt,” he says, voice distorted and distant. The world darkens again when Will squeezes his eyes shut, and opens them to a skinny girl walking past a viewing window with her head covered in a web of wiring, wearing a strange bathing suit. Her hand is clasped in the tall man’s hand. It’s big enough that it looks like a vise around her fingers. When she turns to look at him, Will feels his breath hitch in his throat. It’s Eleven.

Then her face is gone, too. Then it’s autumn. The apple-fresh scent of autumn with a bed of leaves stretching out for miles and miles of forest. There’s a lot of this, so much that Will wonders what it’s supposed to mean, when he recognizes the road from Cartersville into Hawkins.

And then he sees his own face—wary, full of unsteady rebellion. He’s standing inside Hawkins Middle, at the end of a long hallway.

Will’s room slams back down around him and the familiarity is nearly disorienting. He grabs the sheets around himself so he doesn’t sway.

“Holy shit,” he says.

“Sorry. You started getting pale.”

Will gapes at him. “You guys grew up there?”

“In the lab? Yeah.”

"I've been in there," Will says wildly. "For—well, to see doctors. It's. It's a hospital. It's not a place where you should be living."

"We did. All of us did, at some point."

"How do you not hate the world for what happened to you? You, El."

"Not about hating the world. But trusting it is hard."

"Your secrets are safe in this Party," Will swears immediately.

"I know," Thirteen says. "Or I wouldn't have showed you."

"Thank you," says Will.

"What for?"

"For trusting me."

A lot of days in Eleven's life feel like the end of the world.

She has had so many almost ends of the world that she's learned to stop caring. It's very exhausting to care more than she has to. She used to care a lot about what people thought of her and doesn't recommend it at all (Mike doesn't either). So she doesn't. Better idea to just live every day like her last. This is a good reason to see the Party and Mike every day. This is also why Eggos for breakfast and lunch and dinner is a splendid idea.

("It's either splendid or wondrous, kid, not both." "Splendid is both. But better.")

The fog outside? Worrisome. No dinner yet? Worse. Birdie's serves homemade Eggos any time of the day. Which, in her book, means it deserves a Pulitzer Prize.

"Restaurants get Michelin stars. Pulitzers are for books," Mike explains. She looks up from the full-color page of pancakes and fry-ups. "The more stars the bougier. Like French places, you know?"

Eleven nods. *Turtle Island* has a Pulitzer. Poetry is a little weird and harder to follow but interesting all the same. Sometimes it makes a lot of sense. More than the prose. Sometimes none at all. She's fairly convinced the world will definitely end in a bang and not a whimper. But she also might be "full of shit," as Dustin says.

"You're getting waffles, right? You should definitely try the raspberry glaze they make here. I remember when Nancy and I were little kids our mom would bring us here on Fridays if our dad was working late and she let us order breakfast for dinner."

"Just you and Nancy?"

"Holly hadn't been born yet. Come to think of it, I was probably her age back then."

"I cannot imagine you that little."

"I try not to, either. We have tons of baby pictures of Nancy but I think my mom got tired by the time she had me."

"Why?"

"Second child, you know."

"But you all are special."

"Try telling that to my dad," Mike says, closing his menu after he decides on his order.

"He does not think you are special?"

"Well, he definitely wishes I was more into sports." Mike rolls his eyes. "It's so boring. What's the point? You watch a bunch of guys run back and forth around two nets in the air and try to shoot a ball into it. What's so interesting about that?"

"Basketball." Steve plays basketball. He's pretty good.

"Yeah. Or soccer. He made me do hockey when I was little and some kid hit me in the face with a hockey stick. I had a shiner for a week."

"But you write. He does not think that's interesting? Campaigns take imagination. A whole story from scratch. When I read I'm shocked that authors have entire stories in their heads to tell. And you can do the same thing. How is that not special?"

Mike colors high in his cheeks and does a shit job of trying to hide his smile. "I think you're biased, El."

"No. Just honest."

It does not take long after they order their food for the plate to be slid down the bar heaping with waffles and whip cream and a berry glaze as red as blood.

"Aren't you the chief's new kid?"

Eleven looks up. Oh, the question is for her. She can feel Mike tense without needing to look at him. She reaches for him underneath the bar table and smiles softly. "Yes."

"Haven't seen the chief smile since he got back here," says the cook, setting an ice water down by her plate. "Jane, right? Jane Hopper."

"Jane," Eleven nods. The name is normal and proper, but it'll always feel ill-fitting, like wearing clothes that are a hair too tight. Everything she's had on her body until just a few months ago were always too big. "Thank you for dinner."

"It's my pleasure to serve the chief's daughter, Jane."

"You should start telling people that your middle name is Elle," Mike says as he gets started on the next order. His, probably.

"Like your mom thinks?"

"Maybe not a good idea, huh. I guess you have to get used to Jane, since that's what teachers will be calling you."

"Maybe. Hopper thinks I should be homeschooled."

Mike raises his head from where he's propped his cheek. "Homeschooled? Like, you won't go to Hawkins High?"

“Says he doesn’t know if that kind of world is one that I’m ready for.”

“But—” Mike falls quiet. There’s a look on his face that means he’s thinking. And some part of him also looks like he knows Hopper is right and doesn’t like it. “So does that mean you—you won’t be joining us in the fall?”

“Maybe. Not for sure yet.”

Hopper had said something about how it could work if they lived in a big city, like New York, where there were constantly new faces. Old faces and different faces. But not in a place like Hawkins, where everyone “knows each other the second they leave the goddamn uterus.” He was worried they’d bully her for being different.

“Like they did to Mike?”

“Yeah, like they did to Wheeler. And I know you’re capable of handling yourself when you’re allowed to use your powers, okay, I know. But you wouldn’t be able to use them in school. It’d get you expelled.”

“Expelled?”

“As in, you can never go back.”

Eleven had thought about this. Then, “I’m not that different, am I?”

“You don’t look that different, maybe, but you act different and you talk different. You see the world differently from a lot of us. And it’s a good thing. I would hate to see you get rid of all that which makes you who you are for the sake of learning about cell biology or some Shakespeare bullshit in a classroom with a bunch of rude asshole kids.”

“I wish you could,” Mike says, which is Eleven knows is acknowledgment. “But I guess it’s okay as long as we get to see you.”

“Definitely.”

“Every day, or almost every day. That’s enough.”

She sets a bit of waffle with the nice raspberry glaze and whip cream on his plate. Mike said he liked it when he was little, right? “More than enough.”

“She’s strong now, sir. She has allies. Friends. This could be dangerous.”

“Come now, Ray. She’s a little girl, whom I raised myself.”

Ray Carroll has gotten soft. Brenner looks at his right hand, which can’t seem to stop shaking, and clasps it within the grip of his left. “Now who did you say she was staying with recently?”

“I don’t know, sir. It might be someone in Hawkins.”

“A child?”

“No, no. A man.”

“A man?” This much surprises him. “Whom she trusts?”

“I would think so, sir. But I haven’t been keeping track of her. The last time I saw her was—she came to my place.”

Brenner raises his head and looks up at Ray, across from the titanium questioning table that he’s made his thinking station. The metal reflects with a ghostly, bluish sheen onto his quivering jowls. The lab is deathly quiet now that it is closed for scrutiny and investigation. Despite being said that it will reopen as a medical facility, Brenner laughs at the proposal. This place would never pass for one even if they wanted.

“She came to you? Do tell.”

“With another one of them. The children. Eight.”

“The Indian child?”

“She’s grown. And she’s angry, sir. The both of them are.”

Brenner nods.

“What do you seek to get out of this, sir?”

Ray winces as if he’s been physically branded when Brenner looks hard at him. “You suggest that this would be pointless?”

“No, sir, not at all—I merely mean—”

“It would do you well not to question a father’s motives, Ray, I’m sure you know that as well as anyone.”

There is an edge to Brenner’s voice that Ray Carroll has never heard before, as though he has two voices. As though someone is speaking beside him.

“Yes, absolutely.”

Brenner heaves a sigh. “It should not be difficult. It wasn’t hard with the Byers boy. I cannot picture it being difficult with Eleven.”

At this, Ray’s eyebrows come together. “Sir?”

“Just good business, Ray.”

“And she can see dead people, and also anything in the Upside Down, and this place called the Darker and Limbo. She can Shadow Walk, basically. But for real.”

Yeah, it sounds like a load of horse shit. Lucas *knows* it’s horse shit, and yet some part of him still knows that Mike wouldn’t make this shit up just for laughs. Not at this point. He finds himself looking to Dustin, agape, who shrugs and looks at Eleven, who nods and looks to Mike, who says “I know it sounds crazy. Isn’t that what we all said about El? And look at what happened!”

Max, who had the gall to tell Lucas to his face that their story was too derivative in places, sits up with a question halfway out of her mouth. She’d only gotten there an hour before, after finding out her flight had been canceled because of the fog. All planes were grounded

in and out of Indianapolis indefinitely. "I'm not saying you're making this up, though I know you're capable of it," she says, "but how can you know she's not making it up? El can show us what she can do. Even Thirteen can show us. But how do you know she really sees and hears what she says she does?"

"I don't know. We'd just have to trust her, I guess."

"Max has a point. And even if she didn't, don't you think it's weird? Why are so many of them showing up just because Thirteen said they would?" Lucas asks. "Fine, I can believe that he can sense El. He's fucking weird. But One? And the others? They can all sense her? How do you know she's not like one of those dogs, getting called here by some shadow monster again?"

"Or whatever's in the Darker. Or Limbo," Dustin says. "Which sounds worse, to be honest."

"If she was dangerous, Thirteen would tell us."

They all turn to stare at Will, who's startled by the amount of undivided attention.

"Really?" asks Mike, who's not so much challenging him as he is surprised. "Did he talk to you?"

"He showed me things about the lab. I don't think he can show things that aren't real. He's scared, I think, but I don't know of what. There's like, this, this desperation in him. And I don't know if it's because he's trying to tell us something or if he knows something we don't, but I think the best thing we can do is trust his judgment."

"I mean, we would, if he gave us more to go off of," Lucas says. "All we know right now is that the psycho freak guy that was after El is still alive, is going to show his ugly face here again, and that the other kids are going to appear because—why? We don't know enough to do anything."

"What else did he tell you?" Dustin says. "That we all live to see our next birthdays, I hope."

*That Mike's soul is blue, and the same color as his, whatever that means.*

"Not much. Not much that's of use to us. He did show me you, El," Will says, turning to her, and she raises her eyebrows in question. "I saw your face. You had all these wires on your head."

A muscle twitches in her cheek. "Yes."

"He remembers El?" Mike says.

"Yeah, he saw her walk past the window once."

"But she didn't tell you guys what the Darker or what Limbo is?" Lucas asks.

"No. Just what it takes for them to align."

"That's the most important question! What the hell is causing all this fog?"

"Must be one of the two," Dustin says.

"Then that implies that there's a gate open to one of them somewhere, one that El didn't open," Lucas says. "You see what I'm saying here? How can you know one of the others didn't do it?"

"If they did, I don't think it's either of the ones we've met," Max says. "Or know about, anyway. Or else they would have done us in by now."

"Why is it that whenever something weird happens, it always finds us," Dustin says.

"Trust me, I've been asking myself the same shit since this all started," Will says.

"We're like danger magnets."

The door to the basement opens then, and Karen Wheeler calls down the stairs. "Lucas?"

"Yes, Mrs. Wheeler!"

"Uhm, there's someone on the phone for you?" She sounds as

confused as he feels. “Says she’s looking for you.”

“Is it my mom? Erica?” It can’t be Max, since she’s here. And Lucas is not exactly The Ladies Man, so there can’t be anyone else calling them.

“No, I don’t recognize her voice.”

That’s not ominous at all. “Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler,” he says anyway, following her up the stairs into the house. He swats at the air as Dustin wolf-whistles after him. “Shut up!” The phone rests on the counter and he picks up to hold to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hey. Lucas, right?”

He doesn’t recognize this voice either. “Who are you?” he demands.

“Hey, chill. It’s fine. My name’s Nami. Heard you guys were talking shit about me?”

“Holy shit,” Lucas says, and her laugh is tinkling. “No, we weren’t—I mean—how did you—?”

“Had to back your buddy up. Mike, right? He’s telling you guys the truth about me. I really can, as you say, ‘shadow walk.’ That’s a pretty cool way to describe it, so thanks for that! Also, do you always look at Max like that? It’s kind of cute. You shouldn’t tease El and Mike. Pot calling the kettle black.”

Lucas sputters.

“I didn’t open any doors to any of those dimensions. I know it’s hard to trust a stranger, and I feel like you’re probably smart not to. Mike’s too nice,” she goes on. “I’m not as familiar with the Darker, because it’s new. I can’t even be sure that it’s a functioning dimension in and of itself, or what it is. But I’ve seen what’s in Limbo. It’s a lot like reality, but the monsters are hiding in familiar faces. In familiar people. It’s scarier than the Upside Down, in that sense, because you know the Upside Down is evil just by looking at it. You might not know you’re in Limbo for ages.”

Lucas feels chills go down to his bones. “How do you know if you haven’t been there? To Limbo?”

She doesn’t answer right away. Then,

“Because I can see the people who are stuck in there.”

“What?” Lucas asks. He checks to see if Mike’s mom is around, and she gives him a small smile when their eyes meet. She’s standing behind the island mixing a batter with Holly, boosted by her stepping stool. Lucas offers a weak smile in response before turning away. “Like who? How do you get there?”

“I don’t know how to get there. I’ve only ever recognized one person in there, and he was the only one who ever managed to get out of it.”

“Who?”

“The Doctor.”

Tuesday morning sees the usual list of Hawkin’s problems: two more traffic accidents and a “missing KitKat from the third cashier at Big Buy, I swear, someone’s been stealing, Chief. That’s the third missing candy bar this week.”

Hopper yawns as Flo recites his list of issues to deal with—read: ignore—this morning. He’d stayed up late last night watching a rerun of *E.T.* with Eleven and had fallen asleep on the couch with a bag of chips between them. “And there are two kids in your office, looking for you.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Jim mutters, jamming his donut into his mouth as if the problem will go away if he eats enough sugar. “Thanks, Flo.”

“Eat your honey crisp, Chief. You’ll want to be here to walk your daughter down the aisle.”

“Hate that you’re right, Flo.”

It’s Nami, and the kid Thirteen. She stands up with a smile on her

face and Jim would be hard-pressed not to like her. Being surrounded by a bunch of scruffy children and an adopted daughter who communicates mostly through looking at him really lowers his standards of human interaction.

“Nami. Thirteen. Hope you guys aren’t in trouble. Did Harrington stick you guys in here?”

“The guy with the nice hair? Yes. He’s the deputy, right?”

“In training.” Hopper groans as he sinks into his chair. “Alright, make it fast.”

“We have a question for you, actually, sir. I was hoping you had some answers.”

Jim cocks an eyebrow as he crunches into his apple. “Depends on what the question is.”

“What happened the night after Eleven closed the gate?”

Okay, this is tamer than Hopper was anticipating. “What happened? Nothing. Thank god. Shit finally started being okay again. I don’t know, you’re seeing what happened in front of you. We’re all still here.”

“No, I mean, can you recount everything that happened from the moment El closed the gate until—the next morning, I’d say?”

Hopper turns to Thirteen. “What did you see?”

“I’m not sure. You have to answer Nami first.”

“God, I,” Hopper says. “I don’t even know. That night is a blur.”

“Try?”

“Why don’t you tell me first why it’s so important for you to know,” Hopper says, pointing at the two of them with the hand holding the apple.

“It has to do with Eleven.”

“And Mike,” Thirteen says.

“Yeah, I got that part. Wait, Mike? Why Mike?” Hopper says. “Hell. Okay. She closed the gate, and she was bleeding, a lot...”

She’s warm, which is as good as Jim can hope for.

“Hey, kid?” He cranks the lever on the lift and feels it lurch before the motor begins to whirl some dozens of feet above. “Kid, you with me?”

Eleven is weeping. A bit out of relief, Hopper’s sure, and something else. The tears are a little too heartbroken just to be tears of relief or of simple bodily pain. He holds her against his chest and marvels at the impossibility of all this as their lift winds slowly back up to the lab: that there is a child in this world again who clings to him like this, that the gate is closed, that she had left and gone so far alone in a world that was not ready for her. She had gone all the way to her mother’s, and Hopper’s heart breaks a little too to remember what Terry Ives was like, and how disappointed she must have been.

“Stay with me,” he says, jostling her a little when she falls too quiet for his own comfort. Eleven’s breath hitches, and she snuffles.

“Mike.”

“Yeah, we’ll get you to him as soon as I can, okay? I gotta help Doc outta here.”

“Mike.”

“I know, kid. He’s fine. You’re fine.”

In the crimson glow of the gate, and the subsequent darkness, Hopper wasn’t able to see how bad the job had strained her. He helps her up to her feet when the lift reaches the floor of the lab, and almost stumbles himself when he sees it. The entire lower half of her face is encrusted with blood, and the skin around her eyes is purple and blue. There’s a ring of red around her irises where the blood vessels must have ruptured in her eyes.

“Shit. Can you stand?”

Eleven blinks at him unsteadily. “Yes,” she says, voice paper-thin and brittle.

She makes it as far as out of the control room before her knees buckle. There’s a fresh trickle of dark blood on her lip, and Hopper comes around to kneel down in front of her. “Get on,” he says. “You’re not fit to walk out of here, you look like hell.”

When she doesn’t protest, he knows she’s strained beyond argument. She weighs nearly nothing on his back. “Hold on, kid. I might have to let go when we get to Owens, try to hold on.” He hikes her as far up against his shoulders as he can so she’ll stay on him even if her body goes slack.

The lab is littered with the bodies of demodogs and scientists and doctors. There are streaks of blood along the linoleum. Finding Owens isn’t hard; he’s where they left him, and his eyelids flutter when he senses them nearby.

“Hey, Doc. We made it. Now, I know that leg is a son of a bitch, but I’m going to need you to try to stand a little on your own.”

A sheen of sweat covers Owens’ face and his skin is a pallid grey even in the dimness of the stairwell, but he makes a noise of concern when he sees Eleven limp against Hopper’s body. “She’s fine, just drained. Might be going in and out of consciousness soon. Just closed a goddamn interdimensional portal, you know, all in a day’s work.”

Owens cries out when he struggles to stand. The wound on his thigh leaks, even with Hopper’s makeshift tourniquet, and he braces himself against the wall.

“Elevators are all full of dead people. We’re going to have to climb. It’ll be like extreme sports.”

Jim’s just going to be honest about this part. It’s fucking hell. The most he can say about all of it is that at least Eleven holds on, albeit weakly, because Hopper has to let both her legs go to support Owens into the main lobby.

"You good?" Hopper grunts as he sets Owens down right outside the entrance where he'd left Mike and Will earlier that evening.

"Thanks, Chief. I owe you one."

"You owe it to her. We'd all be demo-dinner without her." Fucking Christ. He's spending too much time around kids. "Stay here. I'll get the truck. You need a hospital, real hospital, now."

Eleven drifts back into consciousness when Hopper deposits her as gently as he can manage in shotgun. "Where are we?"

"Still at the lab. We're going to leave soon. Just need to get Doc to the hospital and we can go home." He snags the ratty blanket from the hospital, that Will had been carried out in, from the backseat and wraps it around her. "Stay warm, we'll leave soon."

She doesn't make a sound as Hopper helps Owens into the truck, after they drive it as close to the entrance as the asphalt allows. Owens, who's acutely aware that Hopper is actually saving his life, does his best to climb into the backseat without smearing blood everywhere. It's a challenge not to.

"Mike," she whimpers as Hopper starts the engine, reaching around her to get her seatbelt on.

"Soon, kid."

"The boy?"

"Huh?" says Hopper. He throws the car into reverse and peels out of the parking lot. "Oh, yeah. The one who was with Will."

"He okay?"

"He's fine. She's just," Hopper clears his throat and gets comfortable. His seat is cold beneath him. It's going to be a bit of a drive to the general hospital, which straddles the border between Hawkins and Cartersville. "Attached to him."

"She sounds more than just attached, Pop."

Hopper glares at him through the rearview mirror. "People with fatal injuries shouldn't speak."

Owens answers with a weak, dry chuckle, but doesn't argue. He, too, goes quiet, and Jim is accompanied by the soft sounds of breathing and the roar of his engine as he steps on the gas. When they meet traffic lights he reaches over to wrap the blanket around Eleven's shoulders where it had slid down. She's out cold in earnest now. Her head lolls against the seat.

The hospital is tall and imposing when they finally pull into the parking lot, but Hopper's never been so glad to see it. There's an ambulance parked outside the trauma bay, and he comes to a stop behind it just as a few doctors come out from the sliding doors.

"Chief? Is there something wrong?"

"Yeah, I got an attack victim in the backseat. Injured leg, bleeding everywhere. Suspect it's some kind of feral animal." The passenger side door creaks as he pushes it open all the way. "It was late and we weren't around any phones. I brought him here myself."

"Good use of a belt tourniquet, Chief," one of the physicians says as they slide Owens onto a rolling stretcher. "Still got it in you."

"And—does she need help?"

A nurse is pointing in at the window where Eleven is, and Hopper's heart seizes in a panic until he notices she's facing away from them. Yeah, he doesn't need another horde of doctors seeing Eleven in the state she's in and having to explain it. It gets progressively harder to lie convincingly this late in the night. "No, she's just asleep. Some punk kid I'm keeping out of trouble. Taking her down to the station."

"Thanks, Chief, we'll take it from here."

"Get him patched up, alright?"

The slam of the door when Jim gets back in his car makes Eleven jolt awake. Her eyes are unfocused.

"We're going home, kid. You can see Mike. I promise."

She looks up into his face as he tucks the blanket around her again. Flecks of dried blood decorate the fabric under her chin where they'd flaked away from her face. Something seems to be on the tip of her tongue, and Hopper waits for her to say it.

But her eyelids flutter shut again, shadows.

The drive to the Byers' feels shorter than it really is. At once Hopper cannot wait to get back to the others, to see that Will and the kids are safe, but he's also scared—of what? Scared of where things go from here. Scared of fixing things, of making them right, because it's never as easy as anyone thinks it is. He has never once fixed the pain that comes with loss and healing. He's only known to run away.

Running isn't an option anymore.

The windows of the Byers' house are ablaze with light, a fiery orange beacon against dark sky, as he slows to a stop in the front yard. The crunch of his tires on dirt is enough for the front door to burst open, the kids pouring onto the porch—and Jesus Christ, he doesn't know what they'd done to weaken the Demodogs when they were in the lab, but Harrington looks like he's been put through a sausage grinder.

"El?" Dustin says, before Mike can even open his mouth.

"She's fine. Let me bring her inside."

"Did you guys do it?" Mike asks. "She did it?"

"Yeah," he says. "And don't panic. She looks like hell, but she's fine."

They nod, wary. Still, Hopper's a fool to think they wouldn't panic—even he panics a little, but he's a little better at holding it inside—when they see her face. It's gotten paler since they left the lab, the circles around her eyes darker. The blood had finally dried right under her chin in what would be a comical goatee if this entire ordeal hadn't been so terrifying.

"El!"

"Holy shit, she looks worse than that time she killed those lab people

at school—”

“She looks worse than Steve.”

“Yeah, and Steve looks bad—”

“Move! Get a towel or something. And Harrington, what the fuck happened to your face?”

“Long story, Chief.”

Will is wrapped up in what has to be some five or six blankets on the couch, head resting on Jonathan’s shoulder. Joyce leaps to her feet when Hopper steps over the threshold, tunnel map crunching underfoot, with Eleven in his arms.

“Is she—?”

“She’s fine. You look like hell too, Joyce, sit down.”

Joyce, obviously, doesn’t listen. She goes into the kitchen and runs the water, wetting a dish towel with it, and Hopper doesn’t tell her to sit down again. Her hands are shaking and he knows she’s itching for something to do.

“Eleven,” Mike says, coming to kneel by her head when Hopper lays her out on the couch. Dustin, Lucas, and Max line up beside him. Lucas takes her hand and Dustin curls his fingers around her elbow. Hopper sits down heavily in the single armchair beside the couch as Mike runs his fingertips over her browbone, one of the few bits of her face that isn’t bruised or bloody. “El? Why is she so cold?”

“She’s breathing,” is the best Hopper can offer.

“Here, Mike, get her cleaned up a little.” Joyce hands him the towel and he gets to work. Dustin scrambles to his feet.

“She needs food,” he declares. “Mrs. Byers, do you have anything fast?”

“There’s some leftover casserole in the fridge—”

“Uh—no fridge! We can make her toast. It’s the closest thing to Eggos. Lucas, come help me.”

“You need help making toast?” Lucas says.

Dustin gives him a look like *just get the fuck up and come to the kitchen I swear to God*, which Max understands immediately. Despite everything, Jim laughs to himself.

“Eleven,” Will says softly. His voice is creaky and broken. “Nice to finally meet you.” Mike says nothing, folding the towel over when one side gets dirty, embroidered grapes and pumpkins stained red. “Thanks for saving my life. Twice.”

“You should say that to her when she wakes up,” Jonathan says.

“She won’t say much when she’s awake, either. Her answer’ll be a smile, in case you’re wondering.”

Will leans around Jonathan to look at Hopper. “Really?”

“Not exactly this nation’s chatterbox. Except when she’s watching soaps. You guys will get along.”

Hopper talks for the sake of talking as Joyce helps the kids make some food in the kitchen—everyone’s hungry, adrenaline from the evening having drained them all. It had been easier this evening to justify what he’d done for Eleven’s safety when Mike was shouting and throwing punches, but it’s difficult to look him in the face now. He’s not speaking at all. It’s worlds worse than shouting.

“You hungry, buddy?” Jonathan asks, nudging Will gently. He nods. “Yeah, I am too. Let’s go grab something to eat.”

There are burn marks around Will’s ankles when he stands up, and Jonathan helps him into the kitchen. Something smells delicious. Hopper’s stomach growls.

“She talked about you day and night.”

He can see Mike look up in his periphery. Hopper has his gaze trained on the ceiling. “When she talked at all. She got good at it,

watching TV all day. She visited you every day in that head of hers. And she told me what you were saying to her on the Supercomm.”

Mike doesn't reply. It's not an angry sort of silence, so Jim decides it's safe to forge on.

“I met her in the winter. She was in the woods eating animals and stealing to stay alive. She didn't say anything to me for a while until some time in December.” Hopper sighs and brings his eyes back into his folded hands in his lap. “‘Tonight's the Snow Ball,’ she said. We always had the curtains drawn but she was looking out the window with the lights off that night. I asked her what that meant, but. She didn't say anything else that week.”

And, still, Mike does not say a word. There's a mix of anger and exhaustion on his face, but also what Hopper hopes is forgiveness.

But then, Eleven stirs, and all of Mike's attention turns to her. “El?” he says, hope shooting high in his voice. “El—it's me, it's Mike. We're back at Will's.”

“Mike,” she says, and Hopper can hear the tears in her voice as he stands up to join the others in the kitchen. After all this, after all their time apart, he figures he owes them this much. She drags herself partway upright and reaches for him until they're hugging. He can hear the Wheeler kid start to cry, muffled in her clothes. “Mike.”

Thirteen looks from Nami, to Hopper, who's on his third cigarette telling this story. He has his hands folded in each other and his forehead against his knuckles as smoke rises in a thin, wispy column over their heads.

“Now I have to ask again,” Hopper says, “why do you need to know?”

Nami has one leg bent at the knee, heel propped on the seat of her chair. “I don't see this happen very often, if at all. Very rarely I'll encounter it when an elderly couple are near the ends of their lives. I just—I don't know what it means. If it means anything at all.”

“What?” Hopper says. “What the hell is it? Listen, Eleven's been

through enough bullshit to last her a lifetime, please don't tell me it's something bad."

"Not bad, I don't think."

"So what?"

"El's soul is," she puts her foot back down on the ground. "Bonded to Mike's."

Thirteen stares.

Hopper stares.

Time seems to slow down, even though Thirteen swears he's not doing anything.

"I'm sorry, it's what now?" he says.

If the Chief's eyebrows get any higher they'll join his already receding hairline.

"The reason I ask what happened that night at the gate is because I have no idea how else it could have happened," she says. "Except if someone, or something powerful enough, had pushed it far enough outside of her body, to destabilize it enough, for it to bond to another."

"And it chose the Wheeler kid."

"You said they were very attached to each other, didn't you?"

"What the fuck does it even look like to you?"

"Mike's soul is blue. El's is orange. They're conjoined when they're standing together. There's a long, winding thread when they're apart."

"And Mike's soul. It didn't need to destabilize?" asks Thirteen.

"Maybe it did when hers did. I don't know for sure. All I know is that they're bonded, and I don't know if that's a reason there are three

dimensions worth of monsters converging on this city because of it, or if it's because of the Doctor's return. Regardless, I do know that one can't be safe if the other's in danger."

The fog clears on Wednesday, as suddenly as it had come, which is even more sinister than its arrival.

It also means that Steve is back to listening to the miniscule woes of small-town residents. Hopper looks tired and frowny under his beard on Wednesday morning, and Steve is scared to ask. As far as he knows, the kids are fine, so it has to be something else.

"Morning, Chief. There are éclairs today."

"Don't encourage him, Harrington," Flo snaps.

"Oops?" he says, as Hopper shuffles past and grabs one. His hair is windblown, summer gusts lifting all manners of dust off the sidewalks and streets. "Anyway, Chief—usual deal. We got another call from Big Buy—"

"Them again? Tell them to loosen their corsets and have a drink. I don't care about a missing bag of Frito Lays."

"They're missing a bag of apples, milk, pancake batter, and ice cream this morning. Oh, and a carton of eggs. And they say they have footage from the security cameras."

"Of what?"

"Twins. Breaking and entering."

"Fine. I'll take a look at it. Jesus. Who even has twins in Hawkins?"

"The Duffers? They've got twins."

"They're two years old, Harrington."

"Terrible twos."

Hopper pinches the bridge of his nose and reaches for his telegraph. Steve jumps as he slams it down onto his desk.

“Wh—what are you doing?”

“Signaling home.”

“For El?”

“For Thirteen.”

“He’s at your cabin?”

“He’s useful. If he’s in Indianapolis when we need him it’s not like there’s a landline I could call to reach him, and I don’t know if he can visit the void like El does.”

“You’re going to ask him if he knows these twins.”

“Getting better, Harrington.”

He punches in *Twins. One of you?*

They sit with the silent telegraph between them for what seems like ages. Then,

Yes.

“Shit,” says Steve. “Okay, now what?”

Hopper grabs his jacket and his hat as he stands up. “We find them.”

Easier said than done. Eleven, Thirteen, and Nami had come to them, more or less. Hunting for supernatural children that make their lives out of hiding is not exactly a walk in the park.

Their first stop is Big Buy. Not that they’re trying to find anything there, but just a pit stop for long enough that Hopper can convince the manager that yes, he is looking into this, yes, he’ll arrest the perpetrators, and please, calm down. It’s just some ice cream. It’s summer.

“They’ve been stealing food all week! The same twins! I don’t know

how nobody ever sees them!”

“We’ll find them, Adam. Please. I’m sure it’s just a couple of hungry kids.”

“The KitKats are a dime!”

“I used to steal KitKats as a kid,” Steve says. He chuckles as he buckles himself in. “Dad never let me get candy.”

“Your dad was a right asshole,” Hopper says unthinkingly, and then backtracks. “Shit, uh—I mean, he and I, we weren’t—”

“Nah, you’re right. He was. Still is. He said I’d never amount to anything or anyone but look at me now! Working for the police chief on a real case. Shut him up real good after graduation.”

Hopper is looking at him funny now, keys in the ignition. He’s not starting the car.

“We gonna go or what, Chief?”

“Yeah. We’re going.”

The drive is quiet.

“Your old man gives you a hard time?”

“Like I said, not so much anymore after this job. I think he’s just smart enough to realize that I’ll know the law better than he does one day.”

“Sorry about what I said. I didn’t get along with a lot of people back in high school, your dad being one of them.”

“Oh yeah? What was it like for you?”

“Way different.” Hopper shifts in his seat, dropping one hand from the wheel to rest his elbow against the window. “Guys hated me. Girls liked me okay until I dated Jo—” He balks. “For a while.”

“Mrs. Byers?” Steve says, a grin coming over his mouth.

“Shut up, Harrington.”

“No way. Really? You dated Mrs. Byers. Chief!”

“I said, shut up, Harrington!”

“I thought she was—okay, fine. So you said you didn’t really get along with the guys?” Steve watches the woods sprint past outside the window. “Yeah, I guess that’s a little different.”

“Just a little?”

“Max’s brother isn’t a huge fan of me.”

“What—Max? The redhead kid?”

“Yep. Her stepbrother.”

“What the hell happened with him?”

“The night when you guys left to go close the gate, he came looking for her. I knew from the moment he got out of his car that he wasn’t actually concerned about her, so I tried to hide the kids, but.” Steve makes *kapow* noises with his teeth and mimics punching. “Yeah, that didn’t go down well.”

“What, he was the one that beat your face into a pulp?”

“Jesus, Chief. No need to remind me how bad he kicked my ass.”

“No, Harrington, this is—that’s aggravated assault, he broke your fucking nose!”

“Chief, it’s fine. Look, no harm done to this pretty face! Well, except for the lip scar, but I think it looks kind of badass.”

Hopper shakes his head. “That kid’s lucky I wasn’t there. I’d cut him off at the knees.”

“I’m glad you’re so defensive of me.”

“It’s the law!” Hopper insists.

“I’m sure it is, Chief.”

Hopper grumbles to himself, so Steve knows he’s won this one.

They pass by the quarry and Hopper slows down some so Steve can comb the woods for any signs of twins, or anyone that looks out of place. As he’s learned from Mike, who told him all about Eleven, they’d met her there when she’d run away from their group and then returned to save his ass.

“Wait, Chief. Slow down.”

“You see someone?”

“No, something, I think. At the quarry. Pull up to the cliffs?”

It’s a good thing they’re looking for people without fog, or else it would be little more than groping around blindly in darkness. But as Steve approaches the dropoff into the quarry, he feels his heart start beating in his throat.

“What? What do you—oh, shit.”

There’s a blanket of fog over the water, so opaque that it’s not visible through the haze.

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to be, but I don’t like it,” says Steve.

“Can’t be a good thing.” Hopper reaches for his walkie-talkie, but the wind gusts hard just then, and sweeps the fog away for a lingering moment—long enough for them to see what’s beneath it, and both Steve and Hopper stumble backwards from the cliffs.

Where there used to be water, there is dark, yawning hole. A low, thunderous rumble comes from deep below. It looks bottomless. Steve kicks a rock from the edge down below and it seems to fall forever.

“Not good at all,” he breathes.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

no idea why, but this chapter's ost is [beat it - michael jackson](#). it feels like both a steve song and also a collective song for the party so i'm rolling with it!! also it's an iconic jam of course

really hope you're enjoying!! i'll work hard on chapter 4 ^^;;

## 4. catch-22

### Summary for the Chapter:

in the sleepy harvest city of hawkins, indiana, there is a sickness that has never healed.

### Notes for the Chapter:

hello and welcome to chapter 4!! bit of a delay oops thanks superbowl weekend. but don't worry - this won't be a #tidad. but does feature our favorite #tidad! also, mind the tags.

**content warning:** blood/gore, disturbing elements

Morning alarms in the summer take the form of overzealous golden sun. It stabs Dustin in the eyes.

He curses as he rolls over in bed. His pillow ended up on the floor sometime in the middle of the night, so he shoves his face into the corner where his mattress meets his wall. His mother used to tease him and say that his face would end up angular if he kept sleeping with his head in the corner, and he oozes there for all of five minutes before his eyes spring open. Wait—sun.

The sun hasn't been visible in days because of the fog. Dustin sits up groggily, smearing the sleep from his eyes, and flails in the general direction of his curtains. He gets his head under them, and the blinds, and blinks uncomprehendingly at the dazzling blue sky that stretches out for miles overhead.

"Mom?" he shouts. He throws the blanket off of himself and opens the door. "Hey, Mom!"

The house is quiet. She must have gone out for groceries. Or maybe to the salon to get her nails touched up.

Dustin scratches at an itch on the back of his thigh as he surveys his surroundings from the middle of his kitchen. He considers breakfast. He also considers just grabbing the carton of OJ and chugging it

straight, because the departure of the fog means the house is already uncomfortably warm this morning. Maybe he'll just hit up the Party and see if their lake plans are still in effect now that the fog is gone, and grab some Skittles on the way out.

The empty Yankee candle jars clink against each other when Dustin opens the fridge for the carton of Tropicana, then rattle when he slams it shut. Yeah, OJ from the carton and Skittles from the bag later sounds like a wholesome, balanced breakfast.

Something in the backyard moves, and he pauses in his drinking to peer out the window above the sink. No, not something, someone, two someones. Tews is currently luxuriating in the petting of a lifetime from two girls who have their backs to him. Their hair falls in long, tight braids over their backs, the way Lucas' sister wears hers sometimes; Dustin doesn't think he's ever seen them in Hawkins before.

He crosses the kitchen until he's in front of the sink, looking through the vase of fake daffodils in the windowsill. They seem to sense eyes on them; one of them straightens and turns her head. She meets Dustin's gaze square in the face, and starts. It makes Dustin himself jitter, and he puts a hand up to wave, because she looks afraid.

She cuffs the other girl, who too stands and turns, and they look identical. Twins? Dustin waves again, harder, and tries to give a smile.

But then he blinks—he blinks, and that's all—and they vanish.

He stumbles away from the window, the carton slipping from his grip and splashing to the tile floor. The juice glugs, sticky and cold against his toes. Dustin ignores it.

What the fuck?

Tews sashays back inside through the cat flap in the back door, and Dustin barely even registers. He stays frozen until the lock clicks and he leaps to, grabbing a spatula from the drying rack and aiming it in front of himself. And he laughed at Mike for the candlestick.

The door creaks open.

“Dusty! What on earth is going on?”

“Oh, uh. Hey Mom.” He lowers his weapon of choice and looks everywhere except the pooling juice underfoot. “Morning.”

“Why is there orange juice all over the floor? Did you spill? Tews, no, you don’t like that stuff,” she says, descending upon their cat and scooping him into her arms. Tews, on the contrary, licks his paws and his whiskers clean, purring.

“No, I just dropped it. Accident.”

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!” She balances Tews on her hip and sets down a singular bag of groceries. Including more Tropicana, fortunately.

Outside the kitchen window the grass sways with the force of the breeze this morning. The black-eyed susans do a dance among themselves. It’s a picturesque scene of Midwestern June, and yet Dustin cannot shake the sense of unease which has gathered in his belly like a stone.

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.”

Mike’s life veered far from the usual course of a typical Hawkins teen’s coming-of-age in 1983, but he appreciates that Lucas tries to hold together some semblance of normality. Growing up is hard enough. Growing up living in constant fear of death? Probably harder. It really takes a skeptic to throw his arms up and say “What the hell can we do? Sit here in fear and worry until Dr. Dad comes after us?”

“I guess that is what we’re doing. Not to mention we made plans to go this summer before we even made plans to rebuild Castle Byers.”

It had been Max’s idea. She missed the beaches, and Indiana is landlocked on all sides except for the tiny northwestern sliver where it meets Lake Michigan. The Party had suggested they go down to

Tippecanoe Lake and, sure, it's not a beach, but it's a large body of water. Mike's not even sure he owns swim trunks. He knows Dustin and Will don't, and Eleven had shaken her had the moment she realized lake meant swimming, and swimming meant being submerged in water.

"You don't have to swim! I wouldn't make you do that, El," Max had said. "I might dunk the boys though, if you don't mind."

"I would like to see that."

To which four voices protested, "El!"

Lucas sighs, now, breath blustering over the receiver. "Yeah, because Thirteen only knows what will happen, not when it's going to happen."

"Which could mean today."

"Or tomorrow. Or a month from now."

Mike sighs. "You're right. This isn't living, it's hiding."

"We don't have to go to Tippecanoe Lake. Something closer. Syracuse Lake is just behind the woods by Merrill's farm."

"Wait yeah, why didn't we think of that? There's that old tire swing in the trees there, too. Okay, wait, I'll call Will, you call Dustin. Then I'll go get El. Meet up at the lake?"

"I like it. Over and out."

Will picks up quickly, on the second ring. His voice is thick, still, like he'd just woken up. "H'lo?" he says.

"Morning, sleepyass. Guess what day it is?"

"Uh, Wednesday?"

"Lake Tippecanoe today! Remember? Except Lucas and I think we should just go to Syracuse. It's closer."

“Wait, the fog is gone. Holy shit—I can see the front yard.”

“Exactly. Just in time! Max is already bummed that her trip to Thousand Pines or whatever got canceled because of the fog, the beach was all she cared about.”

“Thousand Oaks,” says Will. “I don’t even own swim trunks.”

“I don’t know if I do either. But it’s fine? If you wear shorts, you can just wade. I probably will too. El’s not going to get in the water and I don’t plan on going in if she doesn’t.”

Mike thinks, for a moment, Will might follow that up with “I don’t own shorts, either,” but he makes a pensive noise. “Okay, I’ll look.”

“You want to bike together?”

“Nah. I’ll ask Jonathan to take me when he goes over to your house later to pick up your sister. My mom is way too high-strung for me to take my bike out there alone.”

The fog had put Joyce on edge in a way that Mike hadn’t witnessed since November of last year, and he can’t blame her. “Okay. I’ll go get El. See you there!”

Mike knows she’s not a huge fan of water. At the end of the week when Will had gone missing, he’d had the chance to see what she could do in it, and she’d said that as time went on she had less and less trouble visiting the void just sitting still in a quiet room. She didn’t go on, only flicking her gaze to his face for a few moments before looking away, but Mike already knew what it meant—that she had no interest returning to it when in water, for fear of what she might find.

Maybe she would be able to see the Darker. Or the place that Nami called Limbo, Lucas had reported to them—a place of seeming familiarity, where darkness lurked in every corner that you called home. A place you might not even know you’re stuck in. He shivers at the memory despite the heat. It’s not at all reassuring to know that the psycho doctor escaped it, whatever she meant by that.

Clear skies today means a return to being baked under the sun, and

Mike is glad they'll be heading towards breezy lakesides soon. He feels like a roasted almond by the time he gets to the woods by Hopper's cabin. The shadows of the leaves slides in dapples of sunlight over his arms as he pushes his bike through the dirt path.

He thinks.

The fog had vanished as abruptly as it had come, and Mike would be a fool and a liar to say he didn't wonder what dimension it could have come from. But, like Lucas, he's had enough close calls with the Upside Down for quite the lifetime. If it's going to wreak more havoc, then they'll go down having fun, together. Not hiding. No more, Eleven would say.

She's not in the window like she usually is, head bent over a book with her curls clipped out of her face with a wild assortment of barrettes. What's more, the window is closed, on a day like this.

How bizarre. Unease prickles along Mike's skin as he climbs the porch steps and tips his head to peek in, and—there she is, cross-legged on the floor. He's about to relax when he sees past his own reflection in the glass. There's something off about her face. Her eyes are unfocused, and only then does he notice Thirteen also sitting cross-legged in front of her, concentrating hard. Blood drips from both their noses. She smiles at something Mike cannot see.

He must be showing her something. Mike fruitlessly wonders what it is, but his mind can't even get past the strangeness of the setting before him. Eleven's not a big fan of being alone with someone she's not entirely familiar with, and they all know it. It took her weeks to adjust to Max. Yet here Thirteen is, quite a lot in her space, and Mike feels a childish, sour feeling brew in the pit of stomach.

But he knocks, and there's a shuffling on the other side before the locks click and the door swings open. Eleven blinks, disoriented, from her seat on the floor and breaks into a smile when she sees him. She stumbles when she gets up.

"What were you doing?" asks Mike. He winces. The question was supposed to sound curious but it comes out accusatory, and Thirteen wipes his nose on his sleeve as he stands.

“Showed her my life growing up in the lab,” he says. “Sharing stories.”

“Sharing?” This is news.

“In a place you call,” Thirteen looks to Eleven, trailing off.

“The void.”

“It’s dark, with a lot of water all around,” Thirteen explains. Mike has never seen the void, though he knows all about it. “Where she used to find you. She showed me her life, in a dream circle.”

“Something Mama could do,” Eleven says. Mike feels his neck getting sore looking back and forth between them.

“What did she show you?” Mike asks. He’s not sure Eleven would ever be able to show him, perhaps because he is not built to see this dream circle.

“The lab. Growing up. Just a place we both knew and ran away from. But a place that was all we knew for a long time.”

Mike knows that Thirteen mustn’t be doing it on purpose—he knows, because he’s fairly convinced that Thirteen, like Eleven, never existed in a world where jealousy and friendship politics were of concern. But standing here watching them, listening to them, he once again becomes acutely aware of just how different the course of his life, in comparison to Eleven’s, has been up until now. That between the two of them, he is the outsider.

There are just some things he won’t understand.

Eleven does not care, but some part of Mike still does. It prods at the softest, most insecure parts of him to remember that there are whole chapters of Eleven’s life that she might never have the words nor will to retell, and yet here Thirteen is, understanding it so effortlessly that Mike wishes for a wild second he could stand in his shoes.

“Mike.” He shudders back to reality when he feels both her hands come up to hold his cheeks. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing. Sorry. We planned to go to Tippecanoe Lake today, remember? The fog’s finally gone, so we don’t have to cancel! Except we’re going to Syracuse instead, because it’s closer.” Thirteen is still standing there, and because Mike was raised to be gracious even if he doesn’t want to, he tacks on, “Uh—do you want to come?”

“Can I?” he says. Surprise tinges his words and Mike immediately feels like a piece of crap for hesitating to invite him. If Thirteen is anything like Eleven, which he must be, then he mustn’t have had any friends growing up, either. Never mind outings to lakes with them.

“Yeah, sure! And like, most of us don’t even have swimsuits, so you don’t have to worry about getting in the water if you don’t want to.”

“I’m not worried about water.”

“Really?”

Thirteen shakes his head. “They never put me in water.”

“The dark,” says Eleven later, as he aims a kick at his Schwinn’s kickstand. The metal creaks. The three of them aren’t going to fit on Mike’s bike, so Thirteen had waved them off and told them to go. He’d catch up. Mike assumes this means *wait until you guys are almost there, slow time down, and take a walk*.

“Huh?”

“I don’t like water. He does not like the dark.”

“Oh, shit. What did they do to him?”

Eleven smooths the seat of her pleated skirt as she climbs onto the bike behind him. The fabric is a rough, faded shade of coffee and ends just above her sagging tube socks. “Do you know what happens when you live in blackness?”

“No sunlight, no light at all?”

“Total blackness.”

"You start waking up and sleeping at funny times, right? I remember Mr. Clarke mentioned this to us in our psychology unit."

"You lose track of time, too. That is what they wanted. They wanted to know if he could see the future better if they did, so they locked him up in a room that was pitch black.."

Damn. "So could he?"

Mike can feel her nod against him, her head resting against his back as it always does. "And it scared him."

"It scares him to know the future? But seeing the future's pretty cool."

"It scares him to know it and know that it doesn't matter what decisions he makes. What he sees will happen. There is no changing the future."

"I'd want to know what's coming."

"Me too. You are like me. I said the same thing. But then Thirteen asked me, if I knew something bad was going to happen, would I live in fear? Unconsciously you would. To protect yourself. 'El, if you could see that one day you and Mike left each other, wouldn't you be sad every time you looked at him?' And yes. I thought about it, and it made me so sad."

"What?" Mike says. He tries to be nonchalant but the word comes out all warbled with alarm. "Do we?"

"I don't know." She wraps her arms around his waist. "I don't think so. But that is the beauty of not knowing. I don't understand all of what he said, but I think I do."

"Don't scare me like that, El."

"Not scaring you. I think we have forever. Even if it's just an average of seventy to eighty years."

Mike makes a noise like kicked chicken. "Don't do that, either."

“Do what?”

Mike’s palms are sweating so much that he can feel his hands slipping on his handlebars. “Give me butterflies!”

Now she laughs against him. It’s still quiet, not uproarious like the way Dustin or Lucas laugh, nor girlish the way Nancy does. Eleven’s laughs are muted dances up and down the ladders of her ribs. Sometimes Mike thinks about the way only he has the privilege of knowing how they feel against his bones, and he has to listen to some Metallica facedown on his floor to feel human again. He hates Metallica.

“Took you guys long enough! Please tell me you weren’t sucking face,” Dustin shouts as they roll into the hills by the lake. The drastic improvement in the weather has drawn all sorts of Hawkins, Syracuse, and Cartersville folk out from their homes, and the banks of the lake are milling with children and families.

“We were not, Dustin! Fuck off.”

“Lame. We would be,” Max says, not even looking up from applying sunscreen to her freckled arms. Lucas stutters, as if he has never done such a thing, the audacity. “El, come here, you need this.”

“Lotion?”

“Sunscreen. Have you ever even been in the sun for more than three hours at a time? You’ll bake like a lobster.”

Eleven does not nearly have as much exposed skin as Max does in her swimsuit, but Max grabs her, squirts a dollop of Coppertone into her palms, and slathers it over her cheeks. She scrunches her face up against it, spitting when Max gets some of it against her lips. “Wait, no, come back!” Max shouts, laughing, when Eleven wriggles out of her grasp and takes off down the sandy banks of the lake.

“You okay?”

Dustin’s cap is perched awry on his curls. He must have jammed it down harder on his head against the wind. He’s not in swim trunks, but he does have shorts and an ancient pair of flip-flops on.

“Why, should I not be?”

“You look pale.”

“Dustin, I’m always pale. I have a face like college-ruled binder paper.”

“Ooh, self-diss. That’s a rare one.” Dustin chuckles when Mike aims a jab at him, and his recent growth spurt means his elbow digs into Dustin’s upper arm. “You look worried, dude. I thought you were excited for today.”

“I was. I mean, I am. It’s just.”

Dustin raises his eyebrow. “Nothing is just ‘just,’ though, is it.” Down by the waterline Will has a crawfish pinched between his thumb and forefinger, wiggling it in Lucas’ face, laughter carrying over the wind when Max asks if he’s scared. “Not with us.”

“Thirteen was in the cabin earlier.”

“Who, the time bomb? What was he doing in the chief’s cabin?”

“Don’t know. But El wasn’t opposed to it, so if she’s okay with it, then I guess I’m okay with it.”

“Are you,” Dustin says, not convinced in the slightest. “Oh, speak of the devil and the devil shall appear! He didn’t follow you guys all the way out here, did he?”

“No, we invited him. Hey, took you long enough!” Mike calls. The wind flattens Thirteen’s clothes against his body as he makes it down the hilly lakeside, and he’s almost as lanky as Mike himself.

“You invited the time bomb?” says Dustin.

“I wasn’t going to just discuss our plans in front of him and then walk away without inviting him!”

“Hey, I didn’t know you’d be coming!” Will pitter-patters through the sand in his bare feet to meet them where the grass ends.

“Mike said I could.”

“You don’t have swim trunks either, do you?” Max says. She doesn’t hesitate to address him like he’s been around them forever, and Mike has the shame to feel some guilt at how hard he’d pushed to keep her out of their party. Despite how different Thirteen is from most of them, she must see a lot of herself in him. “Ugh, you’re all boring as hell. Whatever, if El got in the water, you can too. Come on.”

She takes his hand and drags him away, and Thirteen throws a concerned look over his shoulder at Mike. He raises a hand and pretends to wave a handkerchief in farewell.

“You don’t exactly look like the glowing vision of health either, dude.”

“Huh?”

Mike glances at Dustin out of the corner of his eye before looking back over the water. El ducks when Will splashes handfuls of water in her direction, crawfish forgotten. The hem of her skirt is dark where it’s gotten wet. “You look worried, too. And I know you think you’re so good at hiding it. But I can tell. What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“Cut the bull! You brought Skittles for snacks.”

“And?”

“You always bring those when you’re thinking about something. You just leave them in your mouth and suck on them until they melt.”

“Nothing ever gets past you, does it?”

“Uh, dungeon master? Of course not.”

Dustin scoffs, but he’s smiling now. He hugs his knees to his chest, mirroring Mike’s position in the grass. “Okay, O Great Master. I don’t know, meaning I’m not sure what I saw. I think it was twins. Maybe the ones Time Bomb here was talking about, but I don’t know if I really saw them or not. One second I did. The next, they were gone.

Just like—” He snaps his fingers. “That. Poof.” Jazz hands for effect here.

“Wait! Someone push me on the tire swing!” Lucas says. Eleven volunteers, hiking her wet skirt up so it doesn’t stick to her shins as they climb out of the water.

“They vanished?”

“Just like Lucas can in his Ranger skillset.”

“You think that teleportation might be their thing?”

“Maybe. Who knows. It’s not like I know where they are to confirm now.”

“We need to tell Hopper. And Steve.”

“Listen, Mike, I’m not disagreeing with you. But if they can disappear on command like that, what makes you think the chief and Steve have a chance? How do you know they’re not dangerous, like Lucas said?”

“The chief and Steve have more of a chance than we do. They have a car.” A sigh. “As for how dangerous they are, well.”

“Yeah.”

A somber silence settles over them.

Eleven comes to a stop in front of them and pulls Mike to his feet. “Your turn,” she says solemnly, and begins pulling him towards the tire swing.

“What—El! I’m wearing my regular clothes!”

“So was Will.” And, yep, there’s Will, wringing his shirt dry as he tips his face and smacks the side of his own head to get the water out of his ears. Lucas tosses his towel over him.

“Will is—” Mike begins weakly. Eleven raises her eyebrows. “Uh, braver than me?”

“If you really do not want to, I would never make you.”

Her voice is so serious that Mike hurries to squeeze her hand tighter. “Wait, it’s okay! I’ll get on. Lucas just better let me use his towel.”

“Nah. You can air-dry.”

“Screw you, Lucas.”

Dustin guffaws as Eleven more or less launches him into the lake off the swing, his dark head of hair bobbing to the surface after a full seven seconds. He’s sputtering, surrounded by an oblong of bubbles, but he breaks into choking laughter when he catches sight of Eleven laughing on the hillside.

But the warm feeling cools when Dustin notices it. None of the others seem to. The tire swing keeps rocking. It swings back and forth like a giant, dusty pendulum, as if someone else is on it.

“Guys?”

They don’t hear him. Lucas, merciful, drapes his damp towel over Mike as he gets out of the lake dripping wet. “I think I swallowed a tadpole!” he’s shouting. Dustin almost doesn’t register the words.

It swings, unpushed.

Tick, tock.

“Guys!” He turns his face to shout at them this time, and they hear.

“What? What the hell is wrong, Dustin?”

“See someone hot?” Max says, curling her hair around her hand and wringing the water from it.

“No! Look at—look at...the swing.” Dustin feels his words fade in his throat when he points at it. He feels stupid.

It hangs still. It’s moving barely more than a smidgen in the wind.

“Okay,” Will says, not understanding, like the rest of them. “I’m

looking at it.”

“What are we supposed to be seeing?” Lucas says.

“It was,” Dustin shakes his head. “Never mind.”

But two of them don't seem to believe him. Eleven casts him a look that says he can tell her if anything is on his mind. Thirteen, though, Thirteen looks like he knows exactly what Dustin isn't saying.

Joyce has learned to expect calls from Jim, especially in the evening. In the background of all their calls she can hear the murmur of the TV, sometimes with loud, timed laugh tracks. “Eleven doesn't make me watch the soaps. Just the movies,” he explained once when she suggested that he join her for some bonding time.

“I hope they're good.”

“Exorcist last week. She asked why they didn't just hold her under a heater until the demon ‘vacated the premises.’”

Joyce had to laugh at that.

But tonight, Jim greets her with “Hey. I'm on my way over.”

“What's wrong?”

“Got some questions.”

“For me? I'm not sure how much I could help you.”

“I need someone to bounce some thoughts off of. I didn't want to bother you, but I've exhausted Harrington for the evening.”

Joyce makes a sympathetic noise in her throat. “Have you had dinner yet?”

“Don't trouble yourself, Joyce. Sharing a smoke is plenty.”

He hangs up shortly, and Joyce stares at her phone in the receiver for a moment before busying herself in the kitchen. Like hell she'll let

Hopper sit in her house hungry, mulling over whatever thoughts are eating at him this evening.

Jonathan pokes his head into the kitchen when she gets a potato and onion soup on the stove. "Hungry again, Mom?"

"Hopper's coming over. Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"I was, uh, talking to Nancy?"

"She's here?" Joyce hisses.

"No! Like. On the phone."

"Oh. Don't keep her up so late, Jonathan. Is Will asleep?"

"Maybe, last I checked, he was up drawing."

She shakes her head. "Fine. But nothing crazy past midnight, okay?"

"We know, Mom."

The soup comes out too thin and her sourdough is crunchy enough to be more of a cracker than it is bread. By the time she dishes it up on a singular, frayed placemat, there's knocking on the door. "S'me."

"Hey." Hopper fills up the doorway when Joyce opens it. Right away, she can tell it's been one of those days, though she hasn't seen this kind of look on his face since last year. It's immediately concerning, but Joyce forces herself not to press for questions until she's pointed him to dinner at the table.

"I thought I told you not to make dinner."

"And I thought I told you to just shut up and eat when it's served." She pulls out a chair beside him and retrieves out her own pack of Marlboros as he stares uncomprehendingly at the steaming soup before him. "It's not the best, it's too watery—and the bread is just a lost cause, I know, but Jonathan always likes them this way, so—"

"Joyce. It's fine." Jim grabs his spoon. "It's just been a while since I got home to a hot dinner."

“Oh.” She pauses with her unlit cigarette between her lips, for a moment, before flicking her lighter.

“Yeah.”

He eats. Down the hallway, the muffled sound of Jonathan and Will laughing floats through the walls.

“The boys okay?”

“Yeah, they’re fine. They’re good, even. Will got home laughing today and I can’t say I didn’t cry a little about it.”

“Where’d he go? Out with the other kids?”

“Yeah, they went down to the lake by Merrill’s. Syracuse.”

He grunts, shoveling more soup into his mouth. “Good.”

“I know. It shouldn’t be such a miracle to watch your kids do something so simple, but sometimes it feels like that.”

“That, and,” Hopper reaches for a napkin. “It means they were far from the quarry today.”

Joyce plucks her cigarette from her mouth and taps the end into her ashtray. So this is what must be on Hopper’s mind. “What did you find?”

“Harrington saw it. You know how all the fog disappeared overnight?”

“Yeah, I thought it was weird.”

“More than just weird.” The table creaks as Hopper sets his spoon down and leans onto his elbows. “We found the fog hovering over the quarry where the water would be. Kind of like dry ice, you know, that crazy smoke effect you get. But today was windy, and it blew it away for long enough to let us see what was underneath.”

“What?”

“Nothing. There’s no water and no dirt. There’s a hole the size of that quarry that goes down fuck knows how deep.”

Joyce feels her mouth go dry. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t look like the gate to the Upside Down. You remember, right?”

She closes her eyes. “Wish I didn’t.”

“Red, fleshy. Alive. This was just.” Jim makes his spoon clink against the side of his plate. “A black hole.”

“You think the fog might have come out of there?”

“Maybe. It seems like our best working theory right now, all things considered. Will hasn’t acted strangely or anything, has he?”

She racks her brains. “No. Nothing of the sort. He hasn’t told me anything, either.”

“No weird responses to stimuli? No funny drawings?”

“Not that I know of.”

Jim drags his hands down his face.

“Has Thirteen seen anything about it? Or how about the girl, what was her name—Nami?” Joyce asks.

“No. She said she’d call if she knew anything. And Thirteen’s useful in his own way, but he’s not a hunter. He’s a sit-and-waiter.”

Joyce feels herself smile, despite herself. “You lost me.”

“You can’t ask him to forecast something on command. He can’t find things. The things he sees come to him first.”

“Not like El, huh.”

“Nope.”

She offers her cigarette, and knows that Marlboro is too weak and

smooth for Hopper's taste, but he takes it gratefully. Instead of asking "So what do we do from here?" she breaks the silence with "How is Eleven?" Joyce knows that he's thought long and hard already about the first question, and if he had answers he liked, he would have already started sharing them.

"Eleven is Eleven. She's not a fugitive anymore, which is a win in my books. Otherwise, she's as fine as a teenage girl can get." There seems to be more on his tongue, but he doesn't continue.

"Wouldn't know. Can imagine by extrapolation."

Jim chuckles, bringing her cigarette away from his lips and blowing a thin stream out between his teeth. "Kind of like riding a bike, being a father. Never had experience with one so singularly obsessed with a boy, though."

"God. Makes me wonder what it was like raising me. Raising us." Joyce takes the Marlboro and gets a few more puffs out of it before it reaches the yellow bit. "My mom and I used to fight so much."

"You? Can't see it."

"It was the worst. You don't even know." This time, Jim lights up one of his Camels. "It was okay when I was a little girl. It got real bad in high school. She always wanted to know where I was, so I retaliated by never being home. Hated the way I dressed. Hated my friends. Hated Lonnie."

"We all hated Lonnie."

Joyce turns her gaze to Jim with raised eyebrows and he seems to realize too late what he'd said.

"Uh, sorry."

"Sorry?" she asks. Hopper actually shrinks, which is so comedic that Joyce laughs. "I didn't realize you held a grudge against Lonnie all these years."

"Yeah, well, I can't imagine I'm the only one," Hopper says brusquely. He thrusts his Camel at her like she'll stop talking if she's

taking a drag.

“She did like you, though, surprisingly.” Joyce times her pull from the Camel for now, as Jim stares at her. “Said you were a keeper. Despite how much you smoked in your car and played hooky and failed your classes. She saw something in you that I didn’t, I guess.”

“Yeah? Like what, a mean right hook and a talent for making children cry?”

But Hopper’s not looking at her anymore, instead fishing for onion in his bowl.

Joyce leans on her elbows too, and the table complains loudly at both their weights. “Sure, maybe,” she says. “As much as we fought, maybe she knew you’d be the one who’d stick around through all this crazy bull, some two decades later.”

They don’t venture back to the topic of their bygone years again. It tastes like a field of old, forgotten landmines, and Hopper draws up a piece of paper from his pockets to jot down his thoughts about everything they know so far. Joyce points out parts of the story he’s missing—that the twins have braids, and that Nami might be able to figure out more about The Darker if he told her about the quarry hole. They get lost in trying to figure out dimensions beyond this one, like they have gotten so very good at doing in the past two years, and Joyce tries not to think about the way Hopper sits a little closer to her by the end of the evening.

Even with the windows open, the fan whirring on the counter, and the front door propped open with a rock, the inside of the record store feels like a microwave. Nancy misses the oppressive fog that had blanketed Indiana last week. She has to hand to Jonathan for doing taking on a summer job, though if it weren’t for the promise of his four dollars and fifty cents at the end of every hour he’d surely have gone mad by now.

“You want ice cream?” She comes up to the counter empty-handed, chinhanding. His boss is nice about her loitering to keep him

company as long as she pitches in for a couple cents sweeping the back and the closet.

“You just got some two hours ago,” he says, though it sounds like a yes.

“So?”

“I don’t want you to spend so much of your money on me.”

“And you think I’d sit idly by and let you pay for that custom frame you had made for that photo of Barb and me? In your dreams, Jonathan Byers.”

He scoffs and ducks his face at that. “That wasn’t anything.”

“Uh-huh, okay. What flavor did you want to try now?”

“Nance!”

“Nance!” she mimics in squeaky voice. “Come on. I’m getting pineapple.”

“Uhm, uh. Chocolate.”

“You got chocolate the other three times.”

“Yeah, because I love chocolate.”

“You make El’s obsession with Eggos look weak.”

“I seriously doubt that, you know, I heard her telling Will about the time she ate four boxes of them in one sitting. Frozen.”

Nancy shakes her head at his reticence, but goes down the street to the Dairy Queen for two soft-serve cones. It’ll be her third trip of the day since this morning. The boy behind the counter turns around and laughs when he sees her there.

“Back again so soon?”

“It’s a hot day!”

Hot enough that the ice cream starts to drip slightly by the time she makes it back to Gramophone Records. Jonathan leans over the cashier gratefully when she holds out his chocolate swirl, groaning when it hits his tongue.

“Thanks.”

“Next time, I’m getting you a surprise flavor.”

“Fine, fine. As long as it’s not pistachio.”

“Eugh. I don’t like pistachio either.”

A customer comes in then, and Nancy relinquishes him to tend to their questions. Gramophone is big, the biggest record store between Hawkins and Syracuse, where there’s a Tower Records. Nancy remembers going there when Mike was still in a carrier and listening to the Carpenters on platinum. Her hair had been a dark blonde, like Holly’s, back then.

She licks absently at her pineapple soft-serve as she runs her fingers across a shelf of classic rock and thinks that maybe she’s leaving cone crumbs everywhere. Some sweeping is in order. Well, right after she admires this record cover.

Something moves at the end of the aisle, near the back end of the record store, and Nancy looks up from the Eurythmics record in her fingers. A girl, between Mike’s and her own age, holds a copy of *Purple Rain* with fascination. Her hair falls in long, dark braids down her back. She looks up and meets Nancy’s gaze, and the small smile fades from her face.

Nancy takes a step away. She does too.

How odd.

Then Nancy steps into the next aisle, and she follows—but when the bookcase separates them for a split second, the girl vanishes.

Fear rockets into Nancy’s throat and she stumbles back.

She backs right into the customer that Jonathan had just been

speaking to, who makes a noise of bewildered surprise. “I’m sorry! God, I’m so sorry,” Nancy says, backing away from them immediately. “Sorry about that.”

“Nancy? What happened?”

“There’s someone down there,” Nancy says, backing into the counter, though Jonathan’s coming around it to her side. “I was—she was there, but then she was gone.”

“She might have just dipped into the next aisle?”

“No, it was definitely not that. We were separated by the end of the bookcase for a second and where she should have appeared she was—she was just, gone.”

Jonathan looks from Nancy to the back of the record store and for a moment Nancy really wishes she had Steve’s bat. Or a gun. He shoves the last bite of his cone into his mouth, wipes his fingers on the seat of his jeans, and starts down the aisle.

“Wait—Jonathan!”

“What?”

Nancy reaches behind the register and grabs the rusty crowbar that they use to open the nailed crates of records that are shipped in. “Get behind me,” she says. God knows it’s not a good idea to just walk into the unknown empty-handed, and Jonathan obeys.

Nothing moves as they shuffle inch by inch down the classic rock aisle. “You see anything?”

“No.”

The distant rumble of a tired old Buick passes the front of the store. Someone’s music blares. It’s David Bowie.

“Who’s there?” Nancy tries.

Still, nothing. They make it all the way to the back end of the store where the black metal records are, and the both of them peek around

the right corner where Nancy had sworn she saw the girl disappear to.

Then a voice comes from behind them.

“Trying to skewer somebody with that?”

Nancy screams and whirls, clapping a hand over her mouth. She jumps so hard the crowbar misses Jonathan narrowly, and he grabs her from behind with a shout, too. Behind them is a girl half Nancy’s size, and decidedly not the one she’d seen with the Prince record earlier. This one has a thick sweep of purple hair and an overgrown buzz cut on the side of her head. She smiles tightly.

“Who—sorry, I. Sorry. No, we just thought we saw something.”

The girl raises her eyebrows and says nothing else.

“Were you looking for something?” Jonathan asks. He regains his composure slower than Nancy does.

“Yes,” she clears her throat. “I overheard you speaking about an ‘El.’ Who likes Eggos.”

“She’s nobody,” Nancy says before Jonathan can even start to form words. “She’s just a friend.”

“I’m sure.”

Nancy’s brow furrows and she looks from the girl to Jonathan and back. “I—?”

“My name is Kali,” she says, and the name makes a bell go off in Nancy’s memory. Kali, the girl Eleven confessed to meeting on an excursion to Chicago, one that Hopper still doesn’t know about, please don’t tell him. A girl with an extraordinary ability to trick the mind. A girl like her. “I’m sorry to have frightened you.”

“You’re Eight?” Nancy asks.

Surprise tinges the edges of Kali’s face.

“That I am. She told you about me, I assume?”

“Who was the other girl? Nancy said she saw someone, was that you?”

“Oh, no. No, sorry, that would be Ife. Ifunanya, but she goes by Ife. And her sister Eya. Guys, come on. You’ve unsettled them long enough.”

“Holy shit,” Jonathan says over Nancy’s shoulder when they appear—quite literally out of thin air, a few feet behind Kali. They’re skittish as two walking bundles of nerves, identical down to their postures. Their eyes never stop moving, darting back and forth between Nancy’s and Jonathan’s faces. Ife still clutches the Prince record in her hands.

“They’re a little shy, so be easy on them.” Kali holds her hand out so they come up closer, and Nancy guesstimates that they must be around her age. “Ife has the ability to render herself completely invisible to the naked eye, especially in shadow. She also possesses extrasensory perception between clairvoyance and psychometry.”

“And—and Eya?” Nancy asks.

“Power augmentation.” Eya speaks for herself. “I can choose to enhance or copy the power of somebody that I touch. Usually Ife.”

“Holy shit,” Nancy echoes, and a shy smile tugs at the corners of Eya’s mouth. “So, if Kali is Eight, then. Then you must be—”

“Eight,” Kali points at herself. “Nine,” she tilts her head at Ife, “Ten,” at Eya.

On Saturday mornings Hopper goes to work later, so they have brunch. It’s like breakfast and lunch smashed together, so you get a little bit of both. Dustin is a big fan of brunch, Mike said, when he’d showed up at the cabin on bike one morning and said that they were going to Birdie’s for pancakes but also breakfast burgers.

Eleven loves brunch. Any excuse to eat Eggos and mashed potatoes at

the same time is a winner in her book.

But this morning she climbs out of bed to the song of mountain bluebird to hear that the kitchen is quiet. She sits up. No brunch?

Maybe she could cook it herself. Maybe Hopper went into work early today. Which would be rude of him not to tell her.

No, he's home. He's sitting at the table with a can of beer and his uniform unbuttoned at the collar, staring out the window. On the couch there is a shapeless lump that is Thirteen, still fast asleep.

She seats herself in the chair across from him in her usual spot. He takes his time to meet the question in her face, taking another swig of beer as he does.

"Alcohol."

"Yeah."

"Not a good breakfast choice."

"Mm."

"No brunch?"

"Shit," Hopper curses. "It's Saturday. Shit, shit. Sorry, kid. I didn't even—I lost track of time. Shit. Are you hungry?"

He looks troubled. There's a line between Hopper's eyebrows that he gets when he's angry, or thinking, or giving her one of his *if that Wheeler kid ever tries anything funny, dropkick his ass* lectures. So Eleven shakes her head. Eggos and eggs and toast sounds good but he will probably put sugar in the eggs because he's distracted. By what, she's not sure.

She leans her head against the window and peers owlishly out into the woods, too.

Hopper clears his throat like he's trying to cough up a hairball. "Uhm, the Wheeler kid. Mike."

Some surprise here. Hopper does not usually bring up Mike out of his own volition (*noun*. The faculty of power of using one's will. She learned this one last week). "Mike?"

"He ever...he ever kind of, know something that you're thinking about without you telling him? Or anything like that?"

Eleven blinks. What an unanticipated question.

"He usually knows what I want to order at Birdie's."

"No," Hopper says.

"No?"

"Have you ever had a really specific thought, one that he couldn't have known, and he somehow knew it? Or when something hurts him, you feel it too?"

"It always hurts me when Mike is hurt."

Hopper groans. "Never mind. Forget I asked."

"What?" Eleven says. Behind her, on the couch, Thirteen's breathing grows shallow as he tosses. "What did you mean?"

"Forget I asked!"

Eleven wrinkles her nose. Hopper takes a long, bubbly sip of his beer in the silence that follows.

Oh, there is one time.

"On day three hundred and fifty three, he heard me."

Hopper's attention is on her now. She looks down at her fingers. He's aware that Mike talked to her in the void but she has never told him about this evening.

"He heard you?"

"Maybe. I don't know. When I was in the void, he looked at me. Right at me. And he said my name. But he could not have known I was

there. And he didn't. He got up and walked away."

The table creaks when Hopper leans in. "That was before you closed the gate, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." She shrugs. "Why?"

"Hmm."

"You should ask Mike. He is coming later."

"Might consider it," Hopper grunts, in a way that means he is not considering it at all. It's a special adult-speak. "You guys are heading to the Byers' today, right?"

"We are rebuilding Will's castle."

"I know. Harrington asked for the day off."

"Did you give it to him?"

"I said he could leave early. Need his help on a case this morning."

Eleven nods. Leaving early is good, too.

Hopper takes one last drink of his beer and nods at Thirteen over her shoulder. "Bring him along."

"He likes to come alone."

"Figures."

"When will you finish?"

"With any luck? Five fifteen."

"A new case?"

Hopper hesitates at the doorway. "Kind of," he says. He's not telling the whole truth. "Stay away from the quarry, okay?"

The quarry?

“Okay.”

It's been a while since Jim's almost run a red light. Good thing he's the police chief so there isn't anyone to arrest him, even if he did.

He's thinking. Eleven had seemed genuine in her confusion when asked her about Mike at their sad excuse of a dining table this morning, which means that it's likely she can't feel this soul bond. And if she can't feel it, he's going to make a wild guess and say Mike can't feel it either.

It's a catch-22.

Mike and Eleven can't be safe if they aren't together. They'd be easy targets to take out, or capture, whatever it is that the dimensional monsters want with them. It would mean spreading attention thin between the two of them to protect them. As much as he hates it, there's no way he and Steve could pull that off without raising any suspicion. Both of them are too astute to let it get past them, and in the impossible scenario that it did, it would never get past the other boys. Or Max, especially not Max.

But keeping them together means laying monster bait like honey out for bees, if what Nami says is true. Hopper slams on the brakes and curses like sailor when the car in front of him does the same for a jaywalker, then peels into the next lane as he settles back into his seat.

He has no idea where to go from here.

“Morning, Flo, Callahan. Powell.” He takes off his hat and is greeted by Granny Smith. It's Harrington who offers it to him this morning, the other hand holding a clipboard. He has a jelly donut clamped between his teeth.

“Mmrpf,” he says.

“Stealing my donuts, I see.” Hopper takes the apple from him.

“I'm trying to ensure the longevity of your life and health, Chief.”

“Flo teach you that?” He crunches into the apple and pauses by the wall phone before his office.

“Nah. Something the matter?”

“Get the phone book.”

“Who are you looking for?”

“I’m going to call the motel.”

“Why, to talk to Nami? Wait, here. I have her number.”

Steve unearths it from his pocket, along with a handful of change, a dry LifeSaver, and some lint. It’s scrawled on a scrap of paper torn from a page in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13, which is probably sacrilegious. But after Sara, and especially after Eleven, Jim has gone from a *Dear Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name* man to a *pick a god and pray* kind of guy, so he could not give less of a shit.

“That should be right. And it’s direct to her room!”

Hopper looks from Steve, back to the scrap, then to Steve again. “You have her number?” he says. Steve puts his hands up, chewing fast to jump to his own defense.

“Case reasons, Chief. Strictly professional.”

“Uh-huh. You need to brush up on your lying.”

“I swear!”

Jim punches the number in on the keypad and waits. He wonders if Nami is a homebody or if she’s like the kids and is allergic to being inside for more than an hour at a time. The tone goes on unanswered, and he’s about to hang up when she picks up right before the line goes dead.

“Hello?”

“Hey, uh, Nami. It’s the chief.”

“Chief Hopper? Yeah, how are you?”

“Surprised you weren’t spying in the station and don’t already know. Horrible, as usual.”

She laughs. “I had better things to spy on. What do you need?”

Hopper hesitates and turns away from the rest of the open office. “You know what you told me about El and Mike? Their souls, I mean.”

“Mhmm. Of course.”

“Well, can you—if it’s safe—keep an eye on them? Don’t let one get into trouble without the other, or anything like that?”

Nami does not speak right away. “You’re worried.”

“Of course I’m—!” He releases a breath through his nose and lowers his voice, with some difficulty. “Of course I’m worried, what the hell do you think? But I can’t do anything without either looking suspicious or attracting any unwanted attention.”

“I can’t promise anything.”

“That’s fine, just. Just do what you can. They, they’re kids, you know. They like to go out on adventures a lot, and the last thing I want to do is put El back in seclusion again. It’s shit for her and for me.”

“Again? Meaning she has been before? Mad respect, Chief. Not sure how you’re alive.”

“Yeah, it’s a miracle to me every day,” Hopper grumbles. “Anyway. Thirteen said that you guys are headed here to help her, so please help her and don’t let her or the Wheeler kid do anything stupid.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“And don’t distract Harrington, he’s the best I’ve got.”

“Distract?” Nami says, chuckling. “Who said anything about distracting anyone?”

"You gave him your number out of the motel Bible. Gutsy, kid."

"Don't you have a case to be investigating, and not gossiping to someone about her love life?"

Hopper snorts and bids her a goodbye. Yeah, gutsy. He can see why Steve would have her number.

"You've got some miscreants in your office again, by the way," says Flo when he hangs up.

"Miscreants?" The reflexive groan that usually rises in Hopper's throat at the thought of dealing with kids in his office has come to be replaced with prickling dread. Strange kids usually mean trouble, supernatural trouble.

"Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers. And company."

Company, indeed. Nancy stands when he opens his door, and Jonathan looks up, somber. There are three girls in a row by the chairs at his desk and Jim knows already what this must mean.

"Numbers," he says.

A mild look of surprise passes between them.

"I know, yes. I know about all the lab bullshit. Numbers."

"Eight, Nine, Ten," says the shortest one. "Though we go by Kali, myself, Ife, and Eya."

"Hold on a second," says Hopper. Ten, the one named Eya, has a chocolate bar in hand. "KitKats—you're the twins? You're the ones who've been stealing from Big Buy?"

Alarm starts to trickle into her face, and Jim steps around his desk to sit down. "No, relax. I'm not going to arrest you."

"Told you," Nancy says.

He aims a tired glance at her.

“Sorry. We were hungry, and we’ve spent most of our lives hunting for food in the mountains. There’s not much here.”

Hopper folds his hands over his stomach. “Except for squirrels.”

Ten and Nine trade glances.

“So I assume you must be here for the same reasons as the others?”

“Who is here already?” says Kali. Her name feels familiar, but Hopper can’t pinpoint why. It might have come up in conversation once, yet he can’t fathom when or what conversation it had been in.

“Thirteen and One.”

“Thirteen called us.”

Every pair of eyes turns to Ife. She’s staring at a copy of *Purple Rain*, and Hopper wonders if they’d caught her in *Gramophone*. “He called us. This song was playing in the background. I remember it well. All he said was, ‘trouble at home.’ And we knew what he meant, we knew who it was. We hate leaving the house in the woods but when that was all we wanted to do, we knew we had to come.”

“You live in a cabin in the woods?”

“Far from here,” says Eya. “Near the Rockies. Just her and I. We knew Louisiana first. When our parents were murdered in 1968, the Lab found us on the New Orleans alleys and promised us ‘home.’ We were almost fourteen by the time we were disposed of. We promised each other that we wouldn’t leave the cabin visible, if we were ever to leave it at all. So when we kept dreaming of walking into the world as solid as stone we knew something was wrong. That was when the call from Thirteen came.”

The sixties. Jim shuts his eyes and gives a miniscule shake of his head. It had been the Civil Rights Movement. Jaded cynicism grips him tight for a moment before he shakes it off.

“Then, please God, tell me you know what’s wrong.” Hopper pinches the bridge of his nose. “Because we know something’s wrong—we’ve established that. There’s fog and earthquakes and you kids keep

showing up unannounced. I don't know what you've seen of Hawkins, but if you've seen the quarry where the lake used to be, yeah, there's definitely something wrong in this city."

"Yes," says Ife. "That hole at the quarry is a single portal to three dark dimensions."

Finding Thirteen in Hopper's cabin, unsupervised, is still something that Mike is getting used to.

Eleven is in her usual place the window this morning when Mike traipses through the woods with his bike. It's early enough that she's still eating—if he counts stacking a tower of Hershey's kisses up some half a foot off her plate as eating. It wobbles when she turns her attention away from it to unwrap more. He smiles from the shade of the trees, leaning his bike against one of the trunks since they'll be taking off to Will's soon, anyway. No need to lug it up the porch.

"Morning," he says once he gets to the stairs, and a smile leaps to Eleven's face when she sees him. She gets up on her knees in her chair and leans out the window before he reaches the door. It's an invitation. The curtain is caught in her hair, and it looks like she wants to say something, but when Mike comes to a stop in front of her she simply gazes up into his face as if to commit it to memory. She always does this.

"Morning," she says.

Thirteen is curled up on the couch, still. Hopper's old watch with the dent in the back is cradled in his palms, the TV on, but he fiddles with the knob on the watch without seeming to pay attention to either.

So, obviously, Mike closes the short distance between them and drops a kiss onto Eleven's forehead, and she gives him one of her quiet-xylophone laughs that he loves so much.

"Castle Byers gets a makeover today. You ready?"

"Ready." She's in a pair of overalls with some six pockets and a faded

Hawkin's police department patch sewn over the chest pocket. "Steve is coming?"

"Yeah, he's bringing the nails. And Lucas is bringing his hammer. And I brought ours!" Mike slaps his backpack. "So we should be all set, since Will's got the axes in the shed."

"Thirteen. Will you come?"

Mike absolutely does not heave a sigh here.

"Maybe." Thirteen does not take his eyes off the infomercial for a blender on the TV. He's transfixed. "Will's house?"

"Yeah. It's kind of far from here, I don't know if you'd be able to—"

"I know where it is."

"—find it, because—wait, how?"

Thirteen flicks him a glance.

"I do a lot of walking."

"You mean you do a lot of stalking," Mike mutters once they're out of earshot. Eleven's hair is just long enough to braid now, and there's a messy, misshapen one on one side of her part and clipped out of the way. She had learned earlier in the year, practicing on sailor's rope, and proudly showed her results to Mike.

"He says he wants to know the city better."

"What for?"

"So that when the time comes, he knows where everyone is."

"When what time comes?" Mike frowns as he holds his Schwinn still for her to sit down on.

"I asked the same. He shrugged."

"That's reassuring. Did he show you anything?"

Eleven thinks, then shakes her head. “Not for this.”

“Oh, but he showed you stuff?”

“Usually how we communicate. We don’t use words that often.”

“Oh. Huh.” It’s a curious way to speak, without ever using words. Mike had done a lot of face work when they’d first met, though he’d gotten good at reading Eleven’s expressions. “Does it usually make sense to you?”

“Less or more. More or less.”

“Huh,” Mike repeats. “Okay.”

“I’ll show you a dream circle one day.” She wraps her arms around his middle as he kicks off on the dirt path. “When I figure out how.”

Warmth simmers in Mike’s chest. “I’d like that,” he says, curling his fingers tight round the handlebars. “I’d like that a lot.”

They make a stop at Big Buy to grab some snacks to bring. Dustin had promised a motherlode of trail mix and beef jerky and Snickers, so many Snickers, and some token bananas for a show of health. Steve had sighed and said something along the lines of Dustin giving himself cavities in teeth he didn’t even have and Dustin had conceded, hence the bananas. But Eleven insists that they get Lays, and also the mini marshmallows in rainbow pastel colors.

“For sweet and salty s’mores.”

“El, that sounds disgusting. You don’t even use chocolate?”

“It is good!”

“Lays and marshmallows?” Mike asks, skeptic. “You’re going to have to prove it to me later, because I am not convinced.”

They’re running a hair late by the time Eleven hunts down her Lays and marshmallows and Mike finds those pudding pops that Thirteen had gotten the last time they were at Nami’s motel. Will had told them all to get there before ten, so they could get some work done

before the sun blazed the hottest, and it already reads nine-forty-six AM on Mike's watch.

This would be a good time for Thirteen to show up and do his thing.

The bag of chips doesn't fit in his backpack, so Eleven opts to carry it as they exit the store. But when Mike turns and stands from unlocking his front tire, waiting for Eleven's weight to drop onto the back of his bike, he sees her standing at the curb in front of the grocery store. She frowns at something on the asphalt.

"El, come on, we're going to be late."

"Blood."

"Huh?"

She points at Mike's back tire. "There is blood."

He looks down, and there on the rubber, are dark, oily drops of crimson red along the inner tube of his bike tire. Some of it drips from the spokes.

"What the hell?"

He bends down. A tiny trail of it leads from the bike locker to the curb where Eleven stands. There is a storm drain at her feet. It's quiet now, and has been for a while after the muddy April storms. Dribbles of blood are smeared on the grates. *No dumping - leads to sea!* enjoys dots of blood, too.

"Mike."

He thinks it's Eleven, at first, but when he looks up at her, her mouth hasn't moved. Before he can ask if she'd said anything, every hair on his body stands on end when he hears her name, too.

"Eleven."

"D'you—?"

"I heard." She steps off the curb and squats down by the curb

alongside him. "Is it. Coming from the drain?"

"Eleven."

Louder, this time, and Eleven sucks in a shuddering gasp. "What? Who is it?" Mike asks, when her face goes white.

"Eleven."

"Sorry, I'm sorry," she says. He has no idea who she must be speaking to, or if she sees someone he can't. A distant roar has started in the drain, like it's as engorged with water as it had been two months ago. But there can't be anything but silt and pebbles in the pipes right now.

"El—who is it?"

"Michael."

He almost recognizes it. He's heard this voice somewhere before, in a diner, maybe. It's gruff and male.

"Holy shit," he whispers.

"Michael Wheeler."

And then a monstrous spray of blood erupts from the grates, splattering them with gore, and Eleven shrieks as it does. It rains down upon them hot and thick, almost suffocating. Mike coughs when he inhales it. Then retches. It gets in their hair and their mouths and their eyes. He falls back into the street on his elbows when a thick swarm of flies rushes out of the drain along with the blood, dodging their sticky bodies and scattering into the impossible summer sky behind them.

"Holy fuck, what—El—El, are you okay?"

People are staring at them, giving them strange, unsettled looks, but no one seems to care about the fact that the storm drain had just vomited a fountain of blood upon them. Or that there are two bloody kids in the street. The pungent smell of iron punches at Mike's nose and throat and it takes every bit of him not to throw up then and

there.

“It was Benny.”

“Benny?”

“He died. He died because of me.” She’s shaking, wiping blood out of her eyes, chips forgotten. The bag is exploded on the pavement where her weight had fallen on it. “You heard him.”

“I did, but—El, it’s okay. It’s okay, we’ve been over this, remember?” Mike spits when he tastes blood in his mouth and drags his fingers over his face to get the blood off his skin. It’s already starting to dry uncomfortably. “Lucas said that you can’t apologize for the things that happen to us because we choose to do it for you. And that includes helping you.”

“Then who could that have been?” she asks, eyeing the drain again. It gurgles, the roar fading into silence now. Blood drips from the grate.

Mike stares into the dark hole. For a mindbending moment, it almost seems to breathe with life. Then he blinks.

“I don’t know.”

“Nami. Hey, sorry, it’s early, I know. We need you at the station, now.”

“Weird way to ask me out, Harrington.”

“Not asking you out, unfortunately. It’s about the Darker. We got some twins down here that say they know what it is.”

Nobody looks at her. Nobody looks at Mike. For all Eleven knows they are just two kids biking through Hawkins. She tries not to get blood on the back of his shirt, where it’s mostly clean. Dustin and Lucas and Will are going to freak out. And Max. And Steve, oh no, he’s going to tell Hopper.

“El, just grab on. It’s okay.”

“I will get you dirty.”

“I’m already gross all over in the front, what’s some more?” He squirms. “And, actually—hey, stop! I’m ticklish!”

In spite of themselves, Eleven laughs.

By the time they pull up to the Byers’ house, everyone is already there. A row of messily parked bikes leans against the porch. Mike leaves his around the side of the house out of view. When they climb off they leave blood behind. It’s starting to look like dried barbecue sauce, gross.

The door bursts open and they freeze.

“Finally, you guys are here! Son of a bitch, Mike, your food’s getting cold. Will’s mom made Eggos for us!”

“Thanks, Dustin. Yeah, sorry, we got held up at Big Buy.”

“I thought El said she was bringing Lays,” Will says, peeking his head over Dustin’s shoulder.

There’s so much blood and none of them are saying anything.

“Why can’t they see it?” she whispers.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you guys still flirting?” Lucas, now. “What’s the matter?”

Mike glances at Eleven.

“Uh, you guys can’t see it?”

“See what?” Max pushes the boys out of her way. “I see my best friend and her dog.”

“Screw you, Max.”

“Just stating the facts!”

“Did you pick that up from my sister?” Lucas asks incredulously.

“No, really. What are we supposed to be seeing?” Dustin asks.

Eleven follows Mike up the steps until they’re facing the rest of the Party. “We need a shower. Both of us, real bad. And you can’t see why?”

“No,” Dustin says. “Wait—Mike? Mike. Don’t tell me—”

“No! Oh my God, Dustin! No!” Mike shouts, and what parts of his face are visible under the caked, dried blood turn maroon. Max shrieks with laughter and Lucas smacks Dustin in the side of the head, yelling incomprehensibly. Will attempts to throttle him.

“What’s he talking about?” Eleven asks.

“Nothing!” Mike looks like he really wants to crawl into the bloody gutter back at Big Buy right about now, so she decides not to ask any more questions.

“You guys don’t look like you need showers,” Will says.

“You really can’t see it.” Eleven holds her palms out. “What color are my hands?”

“Skin colored. I’m still not following,” Will says.

“Blood,” says El. “When I look at Mike, and he looks at me. So much blood. We are covered in blood.”

“Sir—this is not the correct route to the Wheeler household. He lives in a cul-de-sac. Perhaps you remember when we went there last and saw the children on their bikes?”

“I’m aware. There is nothing at the Wheelers for us this time.”

“So we are we headed?”

“Somewhere a little more ramshackle.”

The scritch of the pencil on paper is inordinately loud for a room as packed as this. A sound so quiet should have flattened between all the bodies, but it doesn't.

Nami can feel her body being held up between Kali and Eya, but her soul is far from the cramped chief's office.

"The Darker is not a dimension at all." Ife's voice scatters through the darkness that presses against Nami like still water. "It is a portal. It is a place where time bends in upon itself. A wormhole. Three dimensions," *scritch, scritch*, "feed into it. A bottleneck. And once it is open all manner of beasts and demons can pass through."

Hopper had called her with little more than a command to get to the station. Perhaps sharing more over the phone would be a poor idea, and it's just as well. The fact that four of the Doctor's former experiments are in one place would probably make it too easy for him.

"You say you learned this from eavesdropping on the Doctor? Papa? The psycho freak who tested on all of you," Hopper voice floats above.

"Yes, by rendering ourselves invisible to him."

"So how does he know any of this? Where did you even find him? He can't have just been bringing it up to shoot the shit with his barista at some cafe you guys were scoping out."

The Darker is not pitch black. It's bizarre that it isn't, but her own body seem to give off a glow that lights the way. The ground slopes uphill, and Nami's breath comes labored as she climbs for what seems like an endless distance.

"He is no longer human."

"What? What the hell does that mean?"

There are noises, but they're all distant.

“How did the gate open to the Upside Down?”

Then, distantly, comes a hazy red light. It looks like traffic lights in storm clouds, rainy and fizzling with ozone. The ground begins to plateau. Lightning splits the red gloom and Nami feels her hair stand on end.

“I don’t know.”

“The one who came after us touched something from that dimension. And that contact opened a gate between this world and the next. By some unknown force, Father and the monster that lived inside that dimension have become one single living entity. It would be no surprise that such a force could tear open the fabric between this world and several others.”

“There’s no way.”

When the lightning turns the clouds blood red, Nami sees a form that she thinks, at first, is a giant spider. It has spindly limbs and no discernible head.

“Some part of that monster found its way into this reality,” says Ife. “And it will not rest. Not until it exacts revenge for what you have done. Be that finishing what it started, or killing the one who banished it back to the Upside Down. Perhaps both, in tandem.”

“Angered a powerful dimension. Fuck. Fuck, that’s what Thirteen told us. What the hell do we do? What even can we do?”

No, not a spider. It does have a head, long and conical. The limbs of its body move in bundled, living shadows. It does not have eyes or any sort of face, yet it seems to be able to sense that it is being watched. Nami stumbles on her own feet when it turns to her.

“Face Papa again. Face whatever it is he’s become.”

There is a silhouette of a tall, white-haired man approaching her even as the shadowed monster lumbers slow and steady in her direction. The floor of Nami’s stomach plummets when she recognizes him—the Doctor, who is much older than she remembers. If what Ife is saying is true, then he must be possessed by this monster, whoever, or

whatever it is.

But there is only one soul inside his body, and it is a dark, black poison.

He does not seem to see her. He is speaking with someone blurred and fuzzy, almost real. Too real, someone who has no place in the Darker.

“The Byers’ house? The home of child that you once inhabited?” the blurred man says.

“They all have congregated in the woods nearby today. I believe we’ll find Eleven there. I’ll say we might even find more than just Eleven,” the Doctor says.

She runs.

“How do we even defeat him? It took everything and cost us so much to kill those dogs from that hell, and Eleven almost killed herself to even close one gate.”

“That we don’t know.” Ife shakes her head. “But that must be why so many of us are here.”

The chief’s office begins to come into view, bright and promising as the monster looms overhead. Nami sees herself slumped against the wall between Kali and Eya and jumps back into her skin and bones so jarringly that she nearly jackknives out of the seat.

“He has no soul,” she slurs. Hopper’s face swims back into view and she clutches at Kali’s and Eya’s thighs to steady herself. Steve straightens up from where he’d been leaning against the wall with arms crossed behind Hopper’s desk, face creasing with concern.

“What did you see?” he asks.

“The Doctor. He has no soul. He might never have had one, if this is possible. There’s shadow monster, and he’s—he *is* the monster, the Doctor is the monster, he isn’t possessed by it. To possess would mean to live as a parasite—”

“Right, because some part of Will was still in there when he was incapacitated,” Hopper says.

“But the Doctor isn’t a host. He’s become the monster.”

“Would killing him achieve anything?”

Nami feels her brain moving faster than she can think. “No, I doubt it, because—because it’s mobile. That soul, if you can even call it one, is mobile, and it will find someone else. It will repeat what happened to Will. And it will never end, not unless we kill the Doctor and trap both of them in a world that can’t reach ours anymore.”

“Like where?”

The answer comes to her before Nami can even really process it.

“Limbo.”

The phone rings then, and all of them jump. It’s Steve who answers.

“Hello, Hawkins Police Dep—” He pauses. His frown deepens, and without another word he hangs up.

“Who the fuck was that?” Hopper says. Steve straps his gun tight to his hip.

“Thirteen. We need to get to Eleven, now.”

Jonathan’s clothes are a little big on him, and Will’s clothes are ill-fitting around Eleven’s frame, but Mike decides he’ll take a band tee and cargo pants over working in bloody clothes for the rest of the day.

“The earthquake. The fog. We all saw that stuff,” Will says as he and Mike clean, or attempt to clean, the inside of Castle Byers before they knock it down. “But I swear, we couldn’t see the blood. I didn’t see any blood on you.”

“I don’t know how that’s possible, we were drenched in it.”

“Mike, you know I wouldn’t lie to you,” Will says. He’s holding a copy of *The Colour of Magic* in his lap atop a pile of dog-eared, dusty *Dark Tower* volumes. “I know what it’s like to see things, that, well. Other people can’t.”

“I know! I know.” The sleeves of Jonathan’s flannel keep sliding down over his hands and Mike pulls the cuffs up to his elbows with unnecessary force.

“Yeah,” Will finishes lamely.

“I didn’t realize how much it sucked. I mean, last year sucked for both of us, but now I know. It feels like you’re going crazy.”

“I believe you, you know. I know the others do, too.”

Outside the fluttering curtain door, Dustin and Lucas are dragging uneven planks of wood through the dirt and throwing them in a haphazard pile. Steve had caught wind that the lumber company that the Gillespies helped run constantly had scrap wood that they would cart off to the farms, and he’d done some hard Charming to get it for free for them to use. Dustin struggles with a particularly heavy piece and curses aloud when it rises out of his hands and floats light as a feather to the pile of wood they’ve created.

Eleven hides her laughs behind her hands as Lucas and Max whine about how she’s showing favoritism and not helping them, how dare she!

“I thought things would be okay after last year.”

Will chortles as he tosses his books in a cardboard box to be brought outside. “I’ve accepted that things will always be a little off about Hawkins.”

“How?”

“Once you lose yourself and come back from it, things never are as bad as they seem, you know?” He catches a glimpse of Eleven giving Max a ride on a square sheet of rough-hewn wood some two feet from the ground like it’s a magic carpet and scrambles to his feet. “Hey, wait! I want to try! I’m next!”

“Get in line, Will, I called dibs!” Lucas says.

There’s still a stained streak of blood on the underside of Eleven’s jaw where she had missed scrubbing it off in the shower, barely visible in the golden summer sun. The effort of levitating an entire person in the air is enough to make blood line the edges of her nostril, but it doesn’t bleed as freely as it used to.

After Max gets down, she nods to both Lucas and Will. “You both can get on if you fit.”

“What? No, it’s okay, I can wait, El.”

“It is okay.”

“Are you sure?”

She nods. “More fun with a friend.”

“Oh, so you just let me go alone?” Max says, sitting down beside her and giving her a playful jab with her elbow.

“You would say it was cheesy if you got on with Lucas,” says Eleven matter-of-factly, and Mike snorts at the affronted expression that comes over Max’s face. She looks to where Mike is sitting in the mouth of the Castle, and her smile is soft.

Mike thinks about the Snow Ball, and Sadie Hawkins, and the collection of days in between, and wonders how the easy times had been so fleeting.

Will and Lucas just barely fit, but Eleven’s right—it does look more fun with the both of them, holding the sides of the sheet of wood so they don’t tumble off. She steers it in figure eights around the tree trunks, dipping it high and low as Lucas and Will cheer for her to fly them faster.

So she does, humoring them, when the laughter evaporates from her eyes and a trickle of blood runs down her lip. Lucas and Will crash into the dirt, rough and tumble.

“Ow, El! you couldn’t have let us down—El?”

“El!” Mike calls out, immediately afraid for the way her eyes slide out of focus. She looks the same way that she had when—he recalls. When Thirteen had been showing her stories in pictures, telepathically. “El, is it—is it Thirteen?” He sweeps his gaze across the woods but he doesn’t see him.

“El? What’s going on?” Max says, taking her by the shoulders.

Her face clears. There is an alarming terror in her eyes when she meets Mike’s gaze, and whatever she had seen must have scared her so badly she scrambles to her feet and runs toward him.

At first he thinks she runs toward him because she is afraid, and wants to feel his touch. But then Mike realizes that she runs at him with no apparent intention of stopping, like she’s about to throw her body over his,

and she almost does,

almost,

Mike’s arms are already outspread

to catch her.

But time slows,

and they are caught in it

like flies

in amber.

They seem to hang in this impossible eternity

for what seems like forever,

Eleven never quite making it into his embrace,

Mike unable to catch her.

*Just an average of seventy to eighty years.*

“Get back! Get behind me!”

Mike lands flat on his back with the force of Eleven’s weight barreling into him when time speeds up again. Thirteen’s voice is shrill and brimming with the same kind of unbridled terror that had been in Eleven’s face moments before. He has his arms thrown out wide as he crowds the rest of the Party behind himself. Eleven plants one hand on Mike’s chest to keep him down as she squints into the forest beyond.

“El, let him go—let him go, I can cover them, I’ll—”

“Go to Thirteen,” she orders, eyes hard and blazing. She climbs off of his body and Mike doesn’t ask what’s happening. He’s not sure he can form the words to.

“What did you show her?” Mike asks. He’s shaking all over and can’t seem to stop it even as Thirteen steps around him so he’s in front of them. Max is still asking what the fuck just happened and Will struggles to explain under his breath what the slowing of time feels like. Mike wonders vaguely how he, too, knows.

“He’s coming. Father is coming.”

Mike can feel his body go cold. “He’s here?”

“He’s here.” Thirteen turns so that he’s facing Eleven again, who has her feet a shoulder-width apart as she stands between them and whoever is coming. “I told her if worse comes to worst then I would find a way to slow time down, but keep you moving in real time so we can escape.”

“No. No way,” Lucas interjects. “There’s no way we’re leaving El behind when we run.”

“She’s a Party member and one of our cardinal rules is to never leave behind a Party member who needs help! Ever. Even when life or death is involved. Especially when life or death is involved,” Dustin says.

“It’s what she told me to do.”

And Mike hates it. Of course that's what Eleven told Thirteen to do, because that is just the kind of person she is. One who lay down in a pool of water to return to a place she so feared to find Will. One who turned to look at Mike across a destroyed science classroom and bid him goodbye. One who puts herself between danger and her friends and doesn't expect to return from it.

A cruel wind picks up, abnormally frigid for the soft swelter of summer. Eleven is breathing so hard her shoulders move up and down. Her hands are curled into fists.

"Don't let her do this alone."

"She won't."

"What?" Mike hisses. "I don't see you helping her?"

"Not me."

"Then who?"

"Wait."

But for who? The wind grows nastier. Eleven's curls almost flatten around her face, and she turns to look at Thirteen over her shoulder. He nods.

The wind dies.

Then they see him.

He is still just as tall. Still just as white-haired. An amiable smile hangs upon his lips and it makes Mike's stomach turn, how easy and reassured it looks.

"Hello, Eleven. Thirteen."

"Holy shit," Max says, and none of them shush her.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? You've grown so much since I last saw you." Brenner shakes his head and his smile widens. "You're a young woman now."

“We have to do something!” Lucas says. “We can’t just stand here!”

Eleven puts her hand out. Her fingers shake with the effort of using her power but Brenner only laughs.

“Oh, come now, Eleven dear. That’s no way to greet your Papa, is it?” He circles her. It’s eerie, how much it makes him resemble a coyote sizing up its prey. Eleven turns to keep him in view and her nose is bleeding harder now.

Brenner strolls behind Castle Byers, then vanishes.

Eleven takes several steps back, chest heaving as she looks around them.

“Where did he go?” says Dustin.

“El, get over here!” Will says, trying to duck under Thirteen. She throws her hand out again and shoves Will back so hard he falls into the dirt.

“You’re stronger than I remember last.” He appears, again, as if from thin air, from behind one of the pines. Eleven spreads her palm out as wide as it can get. Nothing happens, and she turns her palm to look at it before holding it out in front of herself again.

“Go away,” she says. Her ears are starting to bleed and Mike wants nothing more than to run into the clearing and grab her, but he knows if he moves she’ll only expend more effort to push him back like she did Will.

“I’m not here to harm you, Eleven. I never wanted that. I never wanted for your friends to get hurt. Look at them now.” He bends down onto one knee so he’s her height, and nods in the direction of their huddle behind Thirteen. “Look at how afraid they are. It doesn’t have to be this way anymore if you come with me. All things dark and unnatural will never find them again.”

“Why doesn’t he want you?” Max asks.

“Threw all of us away. Got tired of us. None of us had to run.” Thirteen jerks his head at Eleven. “None of us except her.”

“Why?”

Thirteen shakes his head. He doesn't know. Or he does, and he can't say.

“Why aren't her powers working?” Mike says, so antsy he curls his hands in Dustin's shirt. Dustin allows it without protesting.

“Don't know.”

“Think about it, Eleven,” Brenner goes on. “The gate is closed. Your friend Will is healthy and alive. The only reason they live in fear is because of you.”

She's trembling now, looking towards the Party. Her hand lowers, just a little.

“Don't fucking listen to him, El!” Lucas shouts. “Don't listen to a word that bastard says! Remember what we said? We chose this! And when a Party member is in danger we go to the end of the world to protect them!”

“Thirteen.” Mike is two heartbeats away from running into the clearing. He doesn't care. He's not going to let the psycho freak undo all the progress that they've made as friends and as a family. “Thirteen!”

“Anytime now,” he says. “Just wait!”

“For who?” Mike pushes past him. Will grabs at him, but Mike shakes his hand off. “I'm not going let him take her from us, no one is com —”

“Hey, Papa!”

The voice comes from high overhead. Everyone goes still trying to locate it. A great rustle comes from one of the pines, and a mischievous, boyish giggle follows it. Eleven lowers her arm in earnest now. Brenner gets back to his feet, slowly, the unctuous smile sliding from his face. He seems to know this voice.

“What the fuck,” says Max, and for once, Mike has to agree.

The pine rustles again and a boy so young he can't be any older than Holly monkeys his way down until he's hanging from his legs upside-down from a branch. He has a lightning storm of hair so blond that it looks white. "Hey, Thirteen! Miss me?"

"You're late."

"Twelve," says Brenner. "What are you—"

"Hey Papa, you wanna see the new tricks I learned?"

"I thought you were—"

"Great, me too!"

And then everything around them—the trees, the leaves, and Castle Byers—bursts into flames.

Steve would say that the chief is generally pretty good about following traffic rules. Sure, he's the police chief and all, so he could get away with, well, not following them. But he usually does. At most he'll go a thirty-eight in a thirty-five miles per hour zone if he's feeling a little feisty.

But Hopper is peeling through Hawkins nearing fifty-five now with seven people packed into his truck, and Steve would say that he hasn't kissed the hems of Death's robes so closely since that night he ran back into the Byers house with nothing but a spiked bat and a whole lot of stupid adrenaline.

"Easy, Chief. Left here."

"I see someone," Nami says from the backseat. "A little kid. He's moving in."

"One of you?"

"Maybe. I think so. Not sure which one."

"Holy," Steve says when they make the turn into the woods where

Castle Byers is. “Holy god.”

“No,” Hopper says. He kills the engine and grabs the rifle of his dashboard. “No, fuck—no, no, no—”

They tumble out of the truck. Even from here Steve can feel the blaze of wildfire on his skin as it licks up the trunks of the pines. The sharp tang of burning sap and wood reaches his nose and he flinches as the trees crackle and burn. There’s a distant, haunting rattle, like the whine of a demon.

“We’re too late,” Nami says.

“No, I recognize that sound.” Nancy runs up to the fire as close as it’s bearable. She looks over her shoulder at Jonathan. “It’s the monster. It’s the monster that we burned out of Will.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

why yes, that totally is a reference to *it* with the gutter scene! it matches bob’s s2 mr. baldo/pennywise cameo ^^ ost of the chapter is [livin on a prayer - bon jovi!](#)

this chapter was a bit of challenge to write, but i'll work hard on ch 5!!

## 5. the darker

### Summary for the Chapter:

in the sleepy harvest city of hawkins, indiana, there is a sickness that has never healed.

### Notes for the Chapter:

things continue to #happen in chapter 5 ^-^

**content warning:** mentions of character death (occurring to background ocs), blood and gore, disturbing elements

The hours in Melvald's have never passed quickly.

Even so, today feels especially like a test in Joyce's ability to amuse herself in the slowest hours of the day. Stray wisps of her hair blow into her face from the miniature desktop fan. It's felt too long for ages now, but Will insists that she not cut it.

"You look good with long hair, Mom."

"Your mom's not young enough for long hair anymore, baby."

"No, you look good with it." Will had been staunch in his opinion, so despite how uncomfortable and awkward the in-between stage of growing hair out is, Joyce is doing it. Even Eleven has commented on it, putting her fingers to the too-long bangs Joyce had clipped out of her face with a rusted bobby pin.

"Longer."

"Yeah, Will insisted."

"Pretty."

"You think so?"

"Short. Long. Both pretty. Different, that's a better word."

“People actually tend to cut their hair off when they make a big change in their lives,” Joyce said. “It’s a mark of acknowledging that change personally. I used to have hair like—like Nancy’s, you know, but after Lonnie, well. It felt right.”

Eleven had looked particularly vexed upon learning this.

“They cut it off?”

“Yep.”

“I will do the opposite and grow it out.”

“That sounds splendid to me, baby.”

“Splendiferous,” Eleven nodded. “Sounds splendiferous.”

The store phone rings, grating, and Joyce is yanked from her stupor. Her stool scrapes across the linoleum tile below her, and she takes a single, exasperated breath to steady herself before answering it.

“Melvald’s, this is Joyce speaking, how can I help you?”

No answer.

“Hello?”

A thin, flaky static crackles over the phone and Joyce feels an immediate cold sweat break out over the nape of her neck. “Who is —?”

“Joyce.”

“Bob?”

Her reflexive, knee-jerk reaction would be nausea. Or tears. But neither of them come. Of course, it’s unsettling, but a bizarre sort of peace that trickles through her at hearing his voice over the phone in a way that isn’t—that isn’t scary at all. It doesn’t sound like someone dead is talking to her, or someone from the Upside Down, or the afterlife. There’s no heavy, labored breathing. The way his voice brightens, he could still be working at the Radioshack across

Hawkins, piecing his electronic knickknacks together.

“Hey, Joyce.”

“Bob—is that you? I swear to God, if this isn’t Bob, and you think this is just some joke, you’re a sick, disgusting—”

“It’s me. I won’t be here long.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s not much time to explain. I met a girl. She said she knew you and that if there was anything I had left to say to you, then I should say it now.” He pauses. “She had to take off real speedy though, which is why I don’t think I can stay long.”

“Are you—” She swallows. “Are you really dead?”

“Yes. I am. And things are meant to stay that way. Time moves forward for everyone.” He sounds the same as he always did, if not a little distant. “Tell Hop I’m glad for him. Not just glad, thankful. For the things he did and still does. And I’m happy for you. I wish I could have met Eleven too, but I think she’s in good hands.”

“Yeah, she is. The best.”

“Don’t dwell on the past, Joyce. I know so much has happened, and I don’t want you to forget, but life is waiting for you. Live boldly.”

Okay, so Joyce tears up a little here. But she laughs, too, at the absurdity of it all, even as tears worm their way down her cheeks.

“Yeah. Yeah, I will.”

“And don’t let Hop get away.”

She snorts here, wiping her face on her sleeve. “Now that’s one of your crazy ideas.”

And Bob laughs, too. “Take care now, Joyce Byers.”

“I will,” she says, “Bob Newby.”

The phone clinks gently when she hangs up, and something tells her she won't be hearing from him again. Not for a long time, anyway, and some part of her is okay with that. Not all of her, and not entirely, but maybe this is what Jim meant: about living with ghosts forever, but learning that life's not really complete without them.

She slouches in her stool. "Thanks, Nami," she says aloud to the store at large, on the off chance Nami is here and listening. A mother looks up over the carrier where her newborn baby is strapped to her chest to give Joyce a baffled glance.

Bob had said she'd needed to take off real speedy, if it really had been her.

If Nami had to take off somewhere, then it must have been Hopper or Steve that called her.

Just then, the blare of a fire engine slices through the still summer morning, and Joyce jumps again. This time her knee bangs against the underside of the cash register, and she curses. The sirens are close enough that they sound not more than a block or two away. Soon she sees them—tearing through the narrow street, a pair of cherry-red battering rams.

They wing a hard right at the end of the street and disappear from view, and soon, the wail of sirens fades to a faint cry.

First earthquakes, now fires.

Living boldly sounds like a good idea when it seems the end of times is coming.

Will shivers when the ice-cold towel meets his face. He's had more than enough oxygen masks strapped to his face for one lifetime, so the second he feels like he's no longer a living, breathing cigarette, he asks the paramedics to take it off.

"You're extremely lucky, Mr. Byers," says the firefighter treating him. "You and all of your friends alike. That blaze could have cooked the flesh on your bones."

“Don’t be macabre at a time like this, Smithy.”

“Sorry.”

Will squeezes one of his eyes shut when water drips into his eye. Thirteen appears around the back of the fire engine, draped in a blanket, and holds his hand out for the towel.

“I can do it.”

“It’s fine, kid. You’ve been hurt, too. We’re taking it from here.”

The paramedic begins to turn back to Will when he stumbles, eyes sliding out of focus for no more than a few seconds. It’s enough. He blinks and his face is pale, then looks at Thirteen, who still has his hand held out. He gives a coy, simpering smile, and the paramedic hands the towel over without another word, muttering something about post-traumatic stress and needing a minute himself.

Will gives Thirteen a Look.

“What did you show him?” he whispers. His attempt at sounding stern falls magnificently flat.

“Nothing.”

This time Will’s Look is marginally more successful, and Thirteen shrugs as he rubs at the soot on Will’s eyelid. “Enough. What just happened. The fire. Driving here.”

“Oh, that’s nothing.”

“Yeah.”

Behind them, Hopper is speaking to the chief firefighter, who keeps stealing glances at the blond kid that had arrived split seconds before the forest had been set ablaze. Twelve is currently doing cartwheels around them, stopping only to pick up a loose end of a hose and stick his hand into the spout. “Could you impale someone with the force of water if you’re not careful? Like, theoretically?”

“You know him?” Will asks. He rakes his bangs out of his face and

Thirteen gets the soot and grime on his forehead.

“At the lab together.”

“He’s way younger than the rest of us, right?”

“Shared a room with me. Always setting things on fire.”

There’s a shout of alarm when a jet of water bursts from the fire hose. Twelve drops it, jumping away from the firefighters that swipe at him. Hopper snaps and rubs his face in his hand before he waves vaguely in Eleven’s direction.

“He’s a pyrokinetic?”

“Pyro...?”

“He can control fire.”

“And make things explode.”

“Fragokinesis, too?” Just another entry in the *And Will Thought Eleven Was Dangerous* saga.

“Yes. Nothing bigger than balloons or pebbles.”

Will gives a once-over at the charred woods around them. “So this is the first time you’ve seen him do this, huh?”

“Mhmm.”

“How does he make it so that the fire he creates doesn’t hurt people?”

“Don’t know. He chooses who it can burn.”

Will closes his eyes at the memory—the rattling that had come from Brenner’s mouth, the inhuman shrieking rising to a demonic bellow, and the stream of thick black fog into which he had transformed before sweeping away. They’d all believed him to have survived, miraculously, as a human. It’s clear now that they’re dealing with a force far more sinister.

“Thanks.”

“You say that a lot,” Thirteen says. He wrings the dirty rag out and tosses it onto a ladder rung and it hangs like forgotten laundry.

“Sorry.”

A sideways glance here. “You say that a lot, too.”

“Sorry. I mean, yeah, I know.” Will sighs. “My mom says that too.”

“Your mom is right.”

Will snorts, and he’s pleased to see Thirteen quirks the corner of his lips.

They sit in silence. Eleven had gotten the brunt of the smoke inhalation. Small coughs wrack her body. There’s still soot on her face, but Mike is sharing a blanket with her. Nami is speaking to Steve under her breath and he’s nodding, scribbling on a stained memo pad.

“My dad left me too.”

In his periphery, Will can see Thirteen turn his face towards him. “Mike told me. About your dad, I mean. Mine left us, too.”

“Never left.”

“Huh? But I thought that’s what you told Hopper.”

“Can’t leave if he was never there to begin with.”

“Oh.” Not untrue. The loss of a thing would imply, foremost, possession of said thing. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

This time, Thirteen does not nail Will for his apology. “It’s okay.”

“So it was just you and your mom, until, well—the lab?”

“Just us.”

“I guess I am lucky. I had Jonathan. And my mom, she worries a lot,

but she does her best. I owe her my life, to be honest. And I stopped asking if my dad would have stayed if I was a certain way. Or if Jonathan was a certain way. One day you realize it's not your fault and it never was." Will leans on the heels of his hands. "I don't know why I brought this up, sorry. I mean, you can just ignore it."

"No. Wouldn't ignore."

Will looks to Thirteen. "No?"

"Always wondered if my real father wondered about me. Or if he cared I was alive. How I got taken. Went out looking for him. After the lab, wondered if he'd be disgusted by me. Someone who can see life and death as it happens. I would be."

It's the most Thirteen has ever said aloud in one breath. Will has to take several moments to process it all.

"I'm not disgusted. None of us are."

"Don't want to hear what the future holds, most people. Not what they want. Not what they want at the point in time they hear it, of course. That is why it is the future. A curse to know what it is. A curse not to be believed."

"I believe you."

Thirteen looks Will in the face now, eyes uncomfortably piercing, but Will forces himself to hold his gaze. He seems to not even have realized he'd been speaking aloud.

"Even if I hate it, I believe you."

Time might slow down.

Will can't be sure.

"Curious person, William Byers," Thirteen says, breaking the trance.

"You're a funny guy yourself," Will pauses. "Is your only name really just Thirteen? Your mom never gave you one?"

“Mhm. Not the name I go by.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll tell you what it is one day.”

“Okay.”

It has been a while since Hopper has woken up in a cold sweat. The last instance of it had been when the guards at the lab had caught him and run him down in front of the gate to the Upside Down, when he snuck in, and woke up on his own couch hours later with no recollection of how he’d gotten back.

This morning there is no threat. Not an immediate one, anyway. Cardinal song drifts through the windows; sunlight slants through the part in his curtains. Hopper sits up and peels the blankets away from his legs and swings his body out of bed.

Thirteen is on the couch, where he always is. His face is buried in the cushions, and even from the doorway to his room Hopper can hear the soft tick of his watch that Thirteen perpetually has clutched to his chest when he sleeps. Sure, the kid knows time like most of them never will, but it’s more than just a little weird. Eleven has her stuffed tiger. Thirteen, well, likes to cradle a watch to sleep.

The door to Eleven’s room creaks when Hopper opens it, and—she’s still there. A fear he didn’t know he’d been holding slides off his shoulders and he leans his forehead against her doorframe.

He thought fearing for her life and safety was a closed deal by the end of 1984, but it seems the fuck not.

God. God. This is why he closed himself off after Sara. He spent years building those walls, and let them down to let Eleven in, and now he can’t rebuild fast enough to keep the danger out.

She’s awake. He hears her tossing, and she has her eyes on him when he looks up.

“Morning, kid.”

“Morning.” She hugs her stuffed tiger to his chest.

Hopper clears his throat. “You okay?”

The answer probably isn’t yes. Eleven nods, anyway. Hopper takes a chance and steps inside, walking up to her bed and taking a seat on the lumpy edge of it. It sinks beneath his weight but Eleven doesn’t seem to mind.

“I’m gonna guess seeing that bastard wasn’t exactly a walk in the park for you, huh.”

She shuts her eyes, like she’s trying to will away a reaction. When she opens them again her expression is unreadable. Hopper has never heard it in words, what that doctor had done to her, but from what Mike and the others have told him, and what he managed to piece together from sneaking into the lab, one of his greatest wishlist items is to break Brenner’s jaw. “I am fine,” she whispers.

“Hey, uh, listen. If there’s anything about that whole ordeal you want to talk about, I’m here to listen. You know? You’re my—we’re family now. I owe it to you to listen.”

Eleven smiles, minute but sincere. “You too.”

Hopper laughs, a dry one under his breath, and he’s about to say something about not having any business discussing adult concerns with a child when he realizes that children have their uncanny ways of seeing things for what they are and explaining them in terms so simple that it seems preposterous it could be any more complicated.

“Thanks, kid,” is what he says instead.

“Work?”

“Yeah, soon.”

The long strip of black fabric is balled up on the stool that serves as her nightstand. Hopper reaches over and takes it into his hands.

“You visit Mike last night?”

She shakes her head.

“No?”

“Scared.”

“What’re you scared for? You do it all the time, don’t you?”

“I am scared it will put him in danger.”

Hopper scowls. “What do you mean? Did he see something?” A thumb in Thirteen’s direction, over his shoulder.

She shakes her head again.

“Just a feeling?”

“Just a feeling. Anxious.”

“I’ll stop by the Wheelers later today if I have the time. That sound good? I think his mom is worried sick after what happened in the woods by Joyce’s house.”

“It sounds good.”

“Eat some real food when he wakes up,” Hopper’s shoes thunk on the hardwood floor when he gets to his feet. “And if you have to go out, take him.”

“Why?”

“Because if what you say is true, it doesn’t look like your abilities work on that son of a bitch doctor anymore. You need Thirteen to put minutes on the clock to get your ass to safety, so do not leave this cabin without him.”

Mike hasn’t been on house arrest since Will vanished, and he is not enjoying it. It’s summer, for Christ’s sake. The last thing he wants to do is sit on the couch with Holly and watch *The Fox and the Hound*

for the gazillionth time. He had already spent this morning helping clear out a corner in the basement for Nancy's things, since her room has plans to be converted into a study by this time next year, when she leaves for college. He's fulfilled his Sister Favors quota for the day.

Of course, because Mike is the peak of athleticism, he's totally not sore after lugging two boxes and her full-length mirror down the basement stairs.

"Hey, Mom?"

"Yes, Mike."

"Do you think my voice sounds scratchy right now? Honest answer. Does it?"

"Mike, we have been over this."

"Yeah, but—!"

"If you want to see Elle, she's going to have to come here herself."

"But you know Hopper works till after dark!"

"Then that's that, isn't it? Why don't you call Lucas?"

Mike had talked to Lucas all morning on the Supercomm, rehashing what had happened the day before down to the grittiest detail, until they couldn't wring the towel any drier. The forest had gone up in flames: yes. They hadn't been harmed, somehow. Thirteen had shrugged about it; the kid called Twelve was like chimpanzee on LSD and Mike wasn't about to make friends with someone Holly's age.

Still, it might be inevitable.

"Will said Thirteen told him that he's a pyrokinetic and he can make things explode."

"You think he can do that to Brenner's head?"

Lucas laughed on the other end. "Then he'd be like Max."

“Explain.”

“Hair on fire.”

Mike’s eyeroll had been audible.

“Maybe he could make his head explode, though?” Lucas went on to muse, aloud. “Like in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.”

“More like their faces melted off.”

“Semantics, Mike!”

“Why don’t you think El’s powers worked on him, but Thirteen could still stop time? And Twelve’s fire made him freak the shit out?”

“Beats me, Mike. I guess we’re a bunch of lucky fucking suckers that all these psychos and weirdos keep showing up or else we’d be toast by now. Literally.”

So that’s what’s on Mike’s mind as he watches Tod stand over Copper in the pond on TV as Slade aims a rifle in his face, and it reminds Mike so strongly of Eleven standing between the Party and Brenner that he turns his face away.

“Hey, Mike.”

Nancy’s voice comes from behind the couch. Holly pauses with her fruit leather halfway in her mouth and cranes her neck to see Nancy, too.

“Yeah?”

“C’mere. I got something for you.”

Okay, Mike is immediately suspicious. “What?”

“Come here.”

“I’m coming too!” Holly says, climbing off the sofa.

“Holly, it’s boring stuff. Boy stuff.”

“Boy stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

“We’re gonna talk about me kissing El,” Mike says, cottoning on. Nancy makes a face and Holly looks in bewilderment between him and her older sister.

“Okay,” she says, as if that’s not the real answer she wants to give but has no idea how to follow up on this extremely bizarre conversation.

“Really?” Nancy says when they climb the stairs up to her room. “That’s the best you can do? No wonder Mom’s always on your case, you suck at lying.”

“Oh, as if you’re any better? You snuck out to Steve’s house and said you were going to go out to the vigil for Will. As if you cared about him back then.”

“I was a lot more stupid back then!”

Nancy opens the door to her room and lets him in. It’s changed recently from what he remembers. It’s not—drab, per se, but there aren’t as many photos and sparkly doodads lying everywhere anymore. There is still too much pink and her bedsheets are still lacy with flowers, but Jonathan’s jacket is hanging off the back of her chair and lying in the corner is a half-assembled station of test tubes and beakers.

But what really gets Mike’s attention is her open window and the knotted rope of sheets thrown over the windowsill like Rapunzel’s braid.

“I don’t get it.”

“I’m helping you sneak out, genius.”

What? “You are?” Mike’s brain grinds its gears unintelligently. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to teach you something.”

“I don’t need a lesson on how to sneak out.”

“First of all,” Nancy points her finger so close to his nose that Mike goes cross-eyed trying to look at it, “if you were actually any good at sneaking out, I know you would have by now. Second of all, it’s something you need learning. Especially now. I can’t believe I didn’t think to teach you any sooner, though I guess I’d assumed you’d never have to know.”

“What do you know how to do so much better that you can actually teach me?” At this point, Mike isn’t actually trying to challenge her. He’s half scared to know the answer, and half intrigued.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Nancy slings her backpack over her shoulder. “I’m going to teach you how to use a gun.”

She’s crying.

She’s crying a lot, a lot a lot, the kind of crying that you do with your whole body. The kind of crying that takes you in its fist and shakes you like a snowglobe, until all your insides feel foggy and watery. When she looks up there’s blood all over her face. The lower half, her nose is bleeding.

Then the image of Eleven, crumpled and weeping in the grass, dissolves until it’s replaced with the sunny morning sidewalks outside the movie theater. The Hawk, the same place Thirteen had first found Eleven, sticking close to Mike’s side and not letting go. Big, bold letters of the names of the movies march across the billboards under the theater lights. Someone is on a ladder, hanging up more letters. A dark contrail of smoke streams overhead, meeting the street and swirling angrily until a pale figure begins to come into view.

And then, right before Thirteen wakes up, he gets Will’s voice. “I have friends, but never quite a friend like you.”

“Like who?”

“Like y—”

The roof of reality crashes back down upon Thirteen’s shoulders and he wakes with a jolt.

Eleven pulls her hands back. She was waking him up, maybe.

“You were making noise.”

The cabin swims in Thirteen’s vision when he sits up. A throbbing pulse pounds in his temples and he closes his eyes and wills the sensation to go away. In his hands, the dented watch ticks. The noise grounds him.

Eleven has adjusted to the unannounced thoughts Thirteen sends her way now. At most she flinches, or shivers like she’s cold, then blood dribbles in a weak trail down to her lip.

“Papa?” she asks, when he extracts himself from her head.

“Think so.”

“When will he return?”

“Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome.”

That had been the phrase the man on the ladder had been hanging up on the sign below The Hawk. Thirteen hasn’t the faintest idea what those words mean in that order, but he assumes it’s a movie. It’s lost on her, too, unfortunately. Eleven frowns.

“Mike would know.”

It’s not often that Thirteen censors what he sees around Eleven. If anything, she’s probably the one who knows the most. But he thinks it wise not to let her know. He does not show her the dream of her crying, or the bit about Will. That he has no better reason for except that it feels too vulnerable and scary to let anyone else see.

“Can ask him later.”

“Yes.”

Light in the cabin already pours in the windows at a steep angle. Eleven has her knees bent in her chair at the table, eating a frozen apple on a stick. She insists on freezing all the fruit so it'll last weeks, and it means they're refreshingly cold on these hot days. It drips into her lap, a mix of melting ice and juice.

"Hopper's watch. You sleep with it. Why?"

Thirteen tightens his fingers around it. "So I know time is passing."

There's more to this answer for it to make total sense, but Eleven doesn't ask more.

"Thirteen?"

"Mm."

"If you ever see that my friends are in danger, please tell me."

"Your friends?"

"Mike, Will, Dustin. Max and Lucas. I am here today because of them. I can do the—it is the least I can do."

Thirteen thinks about the blood on her face that's to come.

"Okay."

"Promise?"

She really likes these.

"Promise."

Mike's hands were never made to hold guns. The body of Nancy's revolver is cold and heavy against his palms, and it feels foreign and wrong in his fingers. His hands were made for gripping bike handlebars, as many Eggos as he could shove into his pockets, and holding out for El.

Sure, he's aiming said gun at stacked soda cans, but still.

“Yeah, okay—wait, no! No, no. Let go.”

Mike’s groan of exasperation is textbook impatient teenage boy.  
“What now?”

“What did I say about crossing your thumbs on the handle? The slide’s going to break your knuckles. Thumbs on one side, one over the other.”

He rectifies his grip, laying the tip of his index finger on the trigger. It gives slightly when he puts pressure on it. This will be his fourth, maybe fifth, try. He’s missed every shot and sent bullets whizzing into the dirt and one into the trees. His first shot had distressed a flock of crows that leapt from the trees, miniature grim reapers dotting the sky.

“Good. Now shoot.”

He tries. Mike really tries, willing himself to pull the trigger, but his hands shake. Half the world darkens when he screws one eye shut.

Come on, Mike. Pull the trigger.

Don’t be a wastoid.

The metal squeaks when he lowers the gun, bullets loaded at the ready. He hangs his hand loosely at his side.

“I can’t.”

Nancy says nothing.

“Even if my life is danger, even if—even if it’s life or death, I don’t think I can.”

He feels Nancy take the gun from him. The silence isn’t disappointed as much as it is pensive, and she holds it up with a practiced assuredness that Mike hasn’t scene since the night Will’s house had been under siege by Demodogs.

“I never did tell you how Jonathan and I became friends, right?”  
*Bam.* A can topples to the dirt.

"No. I just assumed he had a crush on you and you humored it. And that the rest was history."

Nancy laughs. "That could not be farther from the truth." Another earsplitting bang, and this can of Coca-Cola flies from the tree stump that they had placed it on.

"So what was it really?"

"A long story is what it is. But we taught ourselves how to use guns out here. He's not one to shoot guns, either, never mind point one in someone's face. So when it came down to it, that night at Will's house, I took the gun."

Mike's not sure where she's going with this story.

"But I don't know what might happen if I'm not there. It's not that I think he's weak, that he can't fend for himself. More that I worry that the things we face get stronger and darker each time this happens. And for some of those times I'll be there to hold the guns. For some of those times Eleven will be there to throw her hands out in front of you. But it scares me to think about the times when we won't be there."

"It's not like I'm going to carry a gun around, anyway, though."

"I know." Nancy laughs, glancing at the ground before looking back into Mike's face. In recent months he's come to be eye-to-eye with her. It's something that the both of them are still getting used to. "I know. Strength for you is different."

"All you've ever called me is a weak twerp."

"Yeah, well, you are one," she says, aiming a swift punch to the lower end of his ribcage and Mike doubles over immediately. "But strength for you isn't holding a gun. I wished it would be, just for my own peace of mind. Still, I don't want you to pick one up and kill because I told you you should to protect yourself."

"Okay," Mike says, crossing his arms. "Thanks, but—but say I do need to defend myself one day? What will I do?"

Nancy puts the safety back on with a click.

“I think we’ve got an old, spiked nail bat in our garage that’s in need of a paladin.”

Twelve’s case file isn’t one that Steve’s ever seen.

Granted, it’s not like putting together Eleven’s, or Thirteen’s, or Nami’s, or the twins’ files were any less strange, but Twelve is perhaps in a class of his own.

Hopper is out for the afternoon on the field. Unfortunately, despite the pressing matters at hand, crimes of the real world don’t decide to suddenly grind to a halt even when triple-dimension portals open between this world and the next three, so he’s attending to them after putting Steve on the work for the afternoon.

“By the time I get back I want us to at least semi-figure out what this kid’s story is,” he said.

Hopper glanced behind himself, where Twelve was kicking his feet back and forth on the bench in reception. They’d kept him occupied with an apple from the basket, but he’d begun attempting to eat the core, and blew out a mouthful of thick black smoke when he hiccuped.

“Thanks, Chief.”

“Good luck, I fucking hate kids.”

“You have one now.”

“I hate young kids.”

Steve grimaces over the top of his pen at Twelve, who’s now at the counter where Flo sits, fingers and chin propped on the laminated wood. She straightens her bifocals at him like she hasn’t seen someone so young in months and has to take moments to physically process this. He straightens in his chair.

“Hey, kid. C’mere.”

Twelve points at his chest. “Me?”

“Yeah you, twerp. Any other kids in here?”

“Just making sure.” Twelve clambers into the wooden chair in front of Steve’s desk—or, technically, his quarter of the desk, since he’s sharing with Powell, who had been none too happy about it. “What’s another white boy claiming my space and calling it manifest destiny,” Powell had commented, lackadaisical. Steve’s response was to stutter.

“All right. I got some questions for you.”

“Great, me too. Is it true that—”

“Hey, hey! I’m the police here, okay? I do the questioning.” The memo pad crinkles as Steve turns to a clean page. “Okay. So, the basics. Your name is Twelve?”

Twelve shrugs.

“Is that a yes or a no? I need a definite answer.”

“Sure. But no one calls me that anymore.”

“So what is your name now?”

“Phoenix. But Thirteen calls me Pip. Actually, everyone calls me Pip. Short for Phoenix!”

Steve looks between his memo pad and at Twelve’s—Pip’s—face. He feels like this punk is pulling his leg, but he’s been around kids who suck shit at lying for the past half a year and he likes to think he’s getting better at sensing it. The verity with which this kid is speaking is undeniable. Unfortunately.

“Pip, okay.” He writes that down. “So, Pip. You got a mom and dad anywhere?”

“Kinda. I don’t know where they are anymore.”

“What happened to them?”

Pip shrugs. “I dunno. But we used to live in this place with wheels, with lots of other wheel houses, and one day they just never came home. I guess they got bored of me or somethin’.”

Okay, so, a trailer park. “Were they your real parents? What were they like?”

“Real? Nope,” Pip pops the *p*. “They felt sorry for me, I guess. But they were busy mostly. They were always really excited about crack. Crack, crack, crack. It was this white powder. It looks like sugar! But I tasted it once and it tastes like butt. I don’t know what butt tastes like but it was like that.”

And Steve has to shut his eyes here and take a second to collect himself. Hopper had told him that life as an officer meant that he’d hear some of the most harrowing stories of the roads, but Steve hadn’t expected for them to come so soon. Steep learning curve, he figures.

“So what happened to your real ones?”

“Dunno either. Probably got tired of me too. Most people get tired of me.”

It’s painful, how pragmatically these words come out of a child’s mouth. Steve steers the questions towards the lab.

“You’re a fire kid, huh?”

“Yeah! It’s the coolest, right? Betcha you’ve never seen a kid like me.”

“I’ve met a couple weirdos like you, maybe, but no. You’re in your own class. How’d you become Human Torch?”

“I don’t really remember.”

“Yeah, you’re pretty young.”

“Papa said that I slept for a long, long time,” says Pip. “Long time. So

long that I forgot to grow up! They thought I was going to have cool ice powers and stuff, but that backfired. Haha! Because I'm—what'd you call me? Human torch."

"You slept in an ice bath," Steve repeats.

"Yeah. I mean, that's what Papa told me. And he's kind of a liar sometimes."

"Uh. You wait here a second. Don't move, hear me?"

"Aye-aye, General Donut," Pip says, saluting ferociously. "What? You were eating that jelly donut like a stray dog."

"God," Steve mutters under his breath, picking up the office phone and rummaging for the Henderson household's number. The rings go, and on the third, Dustin picks up.

"Hello, Dustin speaking."

"Hey, you. It's Steve."

"Look what the cat dragged in and pissed all over! Haven't heard from you since—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm working on the case. I have a nerd question for you."

"Ooh, okay. Yeah. Shoot."

"If someone says they've been sleeping in an ice bath so long they forgot to grow up, what the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Uhh," comes Dustin's skeptic drawl. "It means they're lying."

"No, dude. I'm serious."

"Who the fuck even told you that?"

Steve glances over his shoulder and hunches against the wall. "That fire kid."

"Who, Twelve? Come on. You're really going to believe him?"

“Yes!” Steve hisses. “Because he’s the best we’ve got. All the numbered weirdos are the best we’ve got, and if you trust El and Thirteen, then we need to trust this kid. If you think about it, it makes sense.”

“How?”

“Well, El’s fourteen. Right? Thirteen is fifteen, or so he thinks. Shouldn’t Twelve be around the same age? Fourteen, fifteen-ish? Twerp looks like he came out of the womb last night.”

Dustin is quiet for so long that Steve thinks the line’s gone dead. “Hello?”

“Shh, I’m thinking.”

The second hand drags its feet across the face of the clock. Steve watches it, impatiently, until it’s been almost a full minute.

“I didn’t think this was actually possible, but I’d say that El and her band of miscreants are the authority on what is not possible,” Dustin says.

“What?”

“There’s this thing in sci-fi called cryosleep, where people are put in tanks of, usually, liquid in sub-zero temperatures. It stops them from aging. You see it all the time in space-travel movies because the time it takes to get from one end of the galaxy to the other could be hundreds of human years, so they need a way to stay young and sprightly over the distance.”

Okay, so Steve is out of his depth here with this, but it sounds promising.

“So this—this cry and sleep, it basically immortalizes you?”

“Cryosleep. Indefinitely, I guess? It’s not that you stop aging, you just age so slow you basically don’t. I don’t know! This shit only existed in sci-fi until I picked up the phone five minutes ago. I don’t know the ins and outs of it!”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait, what—?”

Steve hangs up. He only has a couple of words jotted on his memo pad. *Phoenix (Pip), lump of a kid, pyrokinesis*. His chair creaks when he sits back down.

“So what’s the verdict, General?”

“You’re a nut job.”

“I knew it,” Pip whispers like he’d just cracked the Zodiac Killer cipher.

“Tell you what. You look like you haven’t eaten in a month. You want breakfast?”

“Yeah!”

“If I get you breakfast, you need to tell me what the hell you’re doing here in Hawkins. What you know about Thirteen and about El. Deal?”

“Okay, deal!”

Holly’s afternoon playdate cancels on her last minute. This means:

- 1) Karen cannot get drunk off two glasses of wine and attempt for the 500th time to understand where she went wrong with her two oldest kids while Ted snores on the La-Z-Boy.
- 2) She will have to entertain her youngest because she is still a mother, and a goddamn good one if she can help it.

Emphasis on the if she can help it. Holly has her arms crossed in the backseat, lower lip quivering because she’s gotten to an age where she’s stopped crying at the drop of a hat. Karen wraps her fingers around the steering wheel and sighs.

“How about we go get some ice cream? We can stop by Big Buy and

get French vanilla. Or whatever flavor you want. How's that sound?"

"Okay," she says, still bummed. A cloud of gloom hangs over the car and isn't chased away until they've physically made it into the ice cream freezer at Big Buy, and Holly's face brightens at the prospect of choosing a whole pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream for herself. Her hands leave prints on the chilled glass and Karen reaches out to straighten the ruffled strap of her tank top where it's caught in her pigtail.

She goes with honey orange. It looks "fun, like Play-doh," and Karen doesn't tell her that if it's gross, she'll have to finish it herself anyway. Holly clutches the tub in both her hands as they wait in line, behind a tall, lanky youth studying the candy rack with acute concentration.

The line in front of him shifts forward. He does not move with it, reaching out for a Reese's Cup—but then he touches his pockets and drops his hand.

He looks up and around, and meets Karen's eyes.

Something in her clicks, and the words come from her mouth as though they do not belong to her.

"Did you want the chocolate?"

The boy blinks at her uncomprehendingly.

"The Reese's cup," she motions at it. "You have no money, right? It's a dime or so, would you like it?"

"Yes," he says, and adds, "thank you."

He's peculiar. He stands beside Karen, not knowing what to do with his hands or where to look until she's done paying. He, also, doesn't speak up again until they're outside, and there's a newly installed, tiny merry-go-round outside the sliding doors that Holly asks to get a ride on. Since she got friend-stiffed today, Karen agrees.

"Thank you," he repeats, unwrapping the Reese's.

“No problem.” She motions towards the road. “You’re not leaving?”

“Waiting for my friend.”

“Oh, she’s still inside? Sorry, I didn’t realize. I thought you were alone.”

“Usually takes a long time. No problem.”

Karen nods, crosses her arms. She leans into the wall of the grocery store so that at least the upper half of her body can catch some shade.

“Sorry your folks don’t have pocket money for you.” The way this boy is dressed makes him appear like he hasn’t worn clothes bought with him in mind; everything is too big or too small.

“Why?”

“Why am I sorry? Oh. I suppose it’s just that—”

“No. You bought this for me. Why?”

It’s a question that Karen hasn’t had a chance to unpack yet, either. What had clicked? Why did she do this? Maybe she was feeling altruistic in that moment. She can have her moments, too.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay.”

She shrugs, and the movement makes her keys jingle against her arm. “You remind me of my son, somehow.”

This is enough to make him stare. “Son?”

“Yeah. Stringbean of a boy. Not much of a boy anymore, though.”

“How?”

How, indeed. This boy doesn’t look anything like Mike. He’s standoffish, a bit, but genuine. Perhaps his mannerisms, but Karen can’t put her finger on it, either. How does she tell a child that her son left home one day two summers ago and never came home? That the son

she got back has never been the same? Sure, there'd been a massive improvement when Elle had walked into their lives, but he's different. Different, and Karen never had a chance to say goodbye to the little Mike she'd raised for thirteen years. And somehow, this boy with the Reese's cup feels like both of him. The one that left and the one that came home.

There's no rhyme or reason to it. A mother's intuition, perhaps, is her best and only justification.

"I don't know," she says. "You just do."

Holly's merry-go-round ride ends with a dissonant tinkle, which is cue that it's time to go before the ice cream turns into milk soup in its carton.

"Be safe getting home," she says, helping Holly off.

He watches her go. The wave he sends her way is tentative, and Karen smiles as she reaches around to do buckle herself in. By the time she starts the car, and turns back to give him one last, cursory wave, he is no longer standing by the merry-go-round. Down on the far end of the parking lot he walks with a girl with a head full of curly brown hair, and she looks quite a lot like Elle.

The teller at the box office looks over her beaky nose when Dustin asks the question.

"Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome does not come out for another week, young man," she says, and jerks her head in the direction of the entrance. "Says on the poster."

That it does. *July 10, 1985* marches across the bottom of the sand-orange poster paper, and Mike purses his lips. There's no sign of it being put up on the board under The Hawk's lights just yet either.

"Thanks," he says.

"What do we do now?" Eleven asks.

She had showed up under Nancy's window not a minute after Mike had gotten back to the house undetected. Nancy's backpack full of bullets and firearms had made a tremendous thud when she threw it back inside her bedroom, and Mike winced, but Karen Wheeler did not march upstairs and ask what the hell was going on. The car hadn't been in the driveway.

Thirteen had been in tow, eating a half-melted Reese's cup, and Mike had been simultaneously annoyed to know they were walking around Hawkins together like he and El do, but also relieved she didn't make the journey between the cabin and Mike's house in the cul-de-sac alone now that they know Brenner is impervious to her abilities. They'd picked up Dustin on the way, who'd already called Lucas and Max to hang out, and all Thirteen had said was "Will knows," which Mike found very suspect but couldn't be assed to press about right now.

"Try to figure out what moves he'll make before he makes them based on what Thirteen told us," Mike says.

"Didn't really say much," Thirteen says mildly.

"You've seen enough, though," says Dustin. "A week, so we've got that much time, maybe less depending on when they hang the title up, between now and his return. So we need to figure out at least how to keep him down when we try to find a way to—"

"Destroy the Darker."

They all turn to stare at Thirteen.

"Destroy a dimension?" Eleven says.

"I don't think that's possible," says Max.

"Not possible. Necessary."

"Or what?"

Thirteen shakes his head. "Bad."

"You know it's not possible to destroy a dimension. Nami said so

herself, dimensions aren't created or destroyed, just that gates to them are opened or closed," says Mike.

"Darker is not a dimension. It is a portal. Three worlds connected to one."

"How can you know that?" Of the six of them, Will's tone is the least accusatory and genuinely confused. Mike once again reminds himself to dial it down and that Thirteen is doing what he can to help them, and that he doesn't even need to be helping them to begin with.

"Nami. I saw. It does not matter what you think is possible. If I have seen it, it will come."

Mike sighs with exasperation. "Okay! Fine. So it's coming. It would be really helpful if you could see what it takes to destroy it, then. Or what we do to stop Brenner? I don't think he'd exactly over the moon about us meddling in his business. Again, I might add."

"Telling you everything I know."

"Even if we figured out a way to destroy a portal, who's going to do it? El almost died last time!" says Mike.

Lucas doesn't look like he likes the implication of this either. "She's not going to be able to close a three-way portal and live."

"And, just for the record, our body count is El, the telekinetic, you, the time bomb, Nami the soul warden, a couple of creepy twins, a purple mind-manipulator, and a kid who's a flamethrower." Dustin ticks the names off his fingers. "I don't know about you, but I don't know if anyone's equipped to help. Except maybe the one who can power-enhance? Which is cool as fuck, if you ask me."

"I just don't think destroying a dimension is something we're capable of. Any of us," Mike says.

"Lucas is very impressed with your skepticism," Eleven says frankly. Lucas frowns and raises a hand with a universally understood expression of *girl, I'm right here*.

"Oh, thanks, El. I think?" He looks back to Thirteen. "Listen, I know

you're telling us what you see. But until we figure out how to get to the future that you're seeing, that future doesn't happen. The future happens because people like us make it happen. Maybe it feels like it doesn't matter what you do to you, but it matters to me. It matters to all of us, to at least have a plan if death comes looking for us. Yet again."

Thirteen regards Mike with such infuriating composure that he wants to grab him and shake him just to see if he'll make noise, like a maraca, or a squeaky toy. He turns to look at Eleven with concentration on his face and Mike snaps. He is so tired of it. It, being—feeling like he's only ever understanding half of this story, of Thirteen's position in her life, of what he knows and won't say.

Sure, there are things that Thirteen can show her and Mike won't understand, and doesn't have to understand. But he knows—he knows, like his life depends on it—that if Thirteen were to show her something about the danger of their Party, she would never tell them to protect them, and he's done letting her sacrifice herself for them.

"Hey, if there's something you want to say, you can say it out l—"

"Mike, no—" It's Will.

Mike steps between Eleven and Thirteen, and it's a shitty move. A vision strikes him so hard in the head he can feel it physically knock him to the ground. His body makes a thud when it hits the cement, but the pain that he expects never comes. It's a bit like hitting water from a too-high dive.

Brenner. He just sees Brenner, laughing, alone. The image doesn't last more than several heartbeats before the cloud-spotted July sky crashes back down on him. The worst of the sunlight is blocked by Eleven's head. Fear relaxes around her eyes when Mike comes to.

"What the hell was that?" he asks. Time feels like thick jelly when he sits up, Dustin brushing the dirt off the back of his shirt and Lucas steadying him when he sways.

"Sorry. Me. Usually go full-blast talking to El."

"Why, does it make a difference? Fuck," Mike says, pressing at the growing knot at the back of his head.

"Clearer. She can take it."

"I can," Eleven reassures. "It does not hurt. What did you see?"

"Just Dr. Dad, laughing." Mike turns to Thirteen, who's sitting back on his heels at his feet. "What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Thirteen—"

"I mean it." Thirteen's gaze meets Mike in the face now, and there is a steely glint in his eyes that means this discussion is over. "Nothing."

It's not Jim's fault, but it feels like it all the same.

"They'd been dead for anywhere between four to six hours at least, Chief. Rigor mortis has already set in."

"I know, it's just. Yeah. Okay, thanks, Gary."

The day has been a long one. Hopper had gotten in late morning, leaving Harrington to deal with the firecracker kid, when he'd received an emergency call from the fire department saying that two people had been found near Syracuse Lake. He thought that *found* had meant *in custody* and not *dead*, so that's how his day's been. He hasn't been to the morgue since the time he broke in to find Will's fake body. This time, he gets two real ones. He's never met them in his life, and still, seeing them ashen blue on the steel trays wrenches his heart something horrible.

"Listen, Hop. You couldn't have done anything."

They had been a girl and a boy. The last two of their kind.

The girl had a 003 and the boy 005 inked into his wrist. Three had a head of wild red curls and could have passed off as one of Max's

siblings; Five had a single hawk feather in his hair. There is blood matted along the length of it and Jim takes care to reach out, lift his hand which hangs off the tray, and place it back under the tarp.

“Send me the autopsy reports when you get them finished, could you?”

“Already on it. I’ll come over sometime this week. Go get some dinner, Chief. Don’t you have a kid now?”

“Oh. Yeah, she—she’s alright. I’ll bring something home for her.”

The sky is a wash of dark tar by the time Jim gets back in his truck. It’s late, way late, and Eleven has probably already eaten. He was supposed to catch up and get case files written for the twins, that girl Kali, and the fire kid. He’ll have to catch up with Harrington the second they get in tomorrow, and call up the motel to see if they’d discount the stays for a couple more tenants.

God, he is not a party coordinator.

Hopper hits the brakes when he sees Joyce walking home, arms crossed and hunched over in her hurry not to be noticed. He rolls down the window on the passenger side.

“Hey. Going home?”

“Hop! What are you doing out so late?”

“Emergency case. I’m going to get dinner. Want to come?”

“I—”

“Probably going to order some waffles to go for El at Birdie’s. You can grab stuff for the boys, too.”

So this is how they end up seated in a booth at Birdie’s, the same one Jim had sat down in to meet Sam Owens. Shit, Sam. He’s probably a good person to call, too, just to get some understanding on all of this recent bullshit that’s popped up. Joyce doesn’t ask him what’s wrong until they’ve finished ordering. Same waitress, only this time she sees Joyce and takes their orders none too graciously.

"She have a vendetta against you or something?" Joyce asks when she leaves.

"Nothing new."

"Hmm." The ice cubes in Joyce's glass clink as she stirs the straw to make the lemon wedge swim. "Something on your mind tonight?"

The table give slightly in Hopper's direction when he puts his weight on his elbows and exhales, hard. Yes, the answer's yes. Finding his words, though, is harder than he's accustomed to. "I've been a cop all my life, Joyce."

"Yeah. I know."

"I've worked in Hawkins, I've worked in Indianapolis. I've worked in New York." He looks up and she searches his face. "How many dead people do you think I've seen."

She shakes her head and shrugs slow. "I'm sorry."

"And it's, you get used to it, you know. These are the things that you learn to live with when you solve crimes as a career. People are fragile. People die. Life is fleeting. I got used to it, or so I thought. I saw Benny, I saw—we saw Bob. I saw my own daughter. It's unimaginable that death hurts at all after watching your own child die, yet it always finds a way."

Joyce leans in and concern has begun to mount on her face. "Someone died? Was that your emergency case today?"

"Two people. Kids." Hopper takes a breath that he can feel in his stomach. "The last two numbered kids, they never made it."

"Oh God. Who did it?"

"Gary—the coroner, whatever he finds will be inconclusive. The autopsy will probably say cardiac arrest, or internal hemorrhage, something along those lines. You could see all the veins in their faces and arms, Joyce. The same way E—Jane was that night. I know they died fighting. Whether it had been some monster, or that bastard Brenner."

Joyce's hands are warm when she reaches across the table to take one of his in both her own. They may not be as calloused as his, but they are tired.

"You couldn't have stopped it even if you'd been there."

"I know. Gary said the same."

"Gary's right."

"I was wondering when I became so weak again. I guess I got soft after meeting El," and at this Jim laughs at himself. It's humorless. "It didn't hurt anymore after a while. After Sara, especially. But I saw these kids, and fuck, it felt fucking terrible, Joyce."

She withdraws her hands and laces her own fingers together. "You think to hurt makes you weak?" she says. Her eyelid twitches.

"That's not what I mean."

"To know pain after your sky has fallen is a courage that most people will never understand in their lifetime. For better or for worse. It means that you have known loss and still found the will to let someone into your heart again. Sure, El has grown so much with you. And she grows every day with you. But raising her has made you a stronger person. Not a weaker one." There is a fire in Joyce's eyes. "So that you feel pain looking into the faces of strangers who have gone, that's strength. And that's something horrible people, and monsters like that degenerate Brenner, will never understand."

They don't break gazes for several taut seconds, and Hopper laughs again, this time sincere.

"You're better at this than I am."

"What, at what?"

"Having life sorted out. I don't know."

"Oh, I am far from having life sorted out, Hop, and you know it," and Joyce laughs here, too.

“As much as I’m not good with kids, I envy them.” Behind the counter, the cook plates up his dinner and taps the bell, ding. “That age where you think you’ve got it all figured out. You don’t, but the belief you do. It keeps you going in the dark.”

There is a light far from here.

The sound a banana makes against wooden desk? Astoundingly loud. This is what Steve learns when Flo slamming one down by his face wakes him up from a nap he didn’t even realize he was taking.

“Good of you to join us again, Harrington. No sleeping on the job, not even Hopper gets to do that.”

Steve sits up, rubbing his eyes. There’s a red line down his cheek where he had rested his face on the metal of a spiral bound notebook. “Time is it?” he asks.

“Almost ten AM. You look like hell, you get any sleep at all last night?” says Callahan.

“Late evening.” He’d taken Pip out for food, which then ended up being feeding stale bagels to ducks, and he listened to him chatter. It was unnerving to hear some of the things he had to say, the way he said them, in a voice of a “nine year old! I’m nine. I guess I’ve been alive for more years than that, but I only remember nine.”

“Less, kiddo. I bet you only remember, what, four of those nine years?”

“No,” said Pip. “I remember everything from the moment I was taken out of the ice bath until now.”

So there is that. Not only is Phoenix “Pip”/“Twelve” von Feu a walking arson fire, he has an eerie ability for total recall of every event in his life from the moment between birth from the ice bath until now.

Steve feels like he has the license to look a little bit like microwaved roadkill right now.

“Long night,” Steve says. He peels his banana and picks at the peel strings.

“No short nights on this job, Harrington.”

“Mmpf.”

The front door opens, closes, lets in a gust of already balmy morning air. Nami has her hands into the pockets of her jacket that Steve has no idea how she’s wearing in this weather, and she reaches up to slide her aviators up her face until they sit upon the crown of her head.

“Morning, Ms. Nami.”

“Hi, Flo. Love your dress today. Hey, hot stuff,” she says. She invites herself to Steve’s fraction of a desk and drops into the seat that Pip had been in yesterday, crossing her legs and arms. Plastic lightning bolt earrings swing back and forth on either side of her face.

Steve looks at her dumbly, fingers poised on his banana mid-string-peel.

“Did we have an appointment?”

“No,” she says. “I’ve been doing my part in all of this.” She gestures vaguely. “This case. Thought I’d let you know what I’ve figured out about the Darker and Limbo in my time exploring, so you guys—well, it’s easier to face something you understand.”

“Shit.” Steve regloves his banana and sets it down to riffle through the ream of disorganized case files on his desk. El’s, Nami’s, Thirteen’s, Kali’s, Ife’s and Eya’s, until he gets to the one where he’s thrown all his collected notes about the dimensions beyond the Darker that he can’t fit into the puzzle just yet. “Okay,” he gets his memo pad. “What did you learn?”

“Screw the notes. I wanted to ask if you’d come along to see.”

“Who, me? I mean, yeah, me. Of course. But how?”

“If you’ll come with me, you’ll see. It involves some astral

projection.”

When she says that, she means astral projection of the both of them. Steve has access to the old, rumbling Buick that Callahan and Powell share on their patrols, and she drops the bomb on him halfway to the quarry.

“Wait, how are you going to do that?”

“Should I write you a manual? How about a full user’s guide to astral projection while I’m at it? All I can promise is that I’ll get you back in your body, I don’t know how to tell you how.”

Steve wraps his fingers around the steering wheel. “Could you do it before?” This is safe. A yes or no question.

Nami fiddles with one of the legs of her sunglasses. “No. I’ve been practicing.”

“I’m scared to ask on who.”

“I started with animals. Cats are easier than dogs. Thirteen let me try it once on him.”

“Try? Uh, did it work?”

“Yeah. He said it was ‘pretty cool,’ but I’m not sure I trust his judgment.”

“I don’t.”

“That’s smart of you.”

“So you think the quarry is the best place to get from here to,” Steve lifts his index finger from the steering wheel, “there?”

“Easier for you. I don’t think I need to be close to it, but I haven’t tried taking another soul along with me over a distance.”

“I’m so reassured.”

“You should be. You can’t die in the astral plane.”

“What, really?”

“Nah. Though if you go far enough and stay away long enough, your body can become possessed in the living world.”

“Increasingly reassured.”

“Probably shouldn’t have told you that last part, huh?” Nami chuckles.

The asphalt gives way to dirt road, which fades into rocky path by the quarry. The trees thin out near the rocks, and Steve feels an immediate, uncanny chill when they pull up to the side of the path and climb out of the car.

“Damn, it’s cold.”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly Tunnel of Love out here.” Pebbles crunch underfoot. A thick blanket of fog remains, a smoky lid upon the ravine, and Steve grimaces. “Et voila. A beauty, isn’t she?”

“Hmm.” Nami peers down the fall into the mist. “Okay, come by the trees.”

“Trees, why?”

“You want to just pass out here?”

“Whoa, whoa. You didn’t say anything about passing out.”

Nami fixes him with a withering glance. “Your soul is about to leave your body.”

“Touché. I guess.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know? I wouldn’t force you to.”

Steve looks at Nami, then past her shoulder at the ghostly quarry, and thinks of the long nights Hopper spends at his desk, of Dustin’s stupid jokes, of Nancy and all her heartbreaking complexities, of Mike and all his chutzpah, and Eleven’s real, honest laughter, so rare it’s like seeing the green flash at the horizon. He takes a breath.

“No, let’s do this shit.”

“Okay. Give me your hand.”

Nami has a crushing grip when he does. For a moment, nothing happens.

“What now?”

“Shh!”

“Can you warn me if you’re going to do anything sudden?”

She nods. Still, nothing seems to happen. Then, Steve sees it—the faint purple lines of blood vessels around her eyes and a nosebleed at her lip. Her face begins to drain of color and it reminds him of the way Eleven had looked that night when she closed the gate.

“I’m going to hit you,” she says, words nearly inaudible.

“Hit me? What do you mean by—”

This is what she means: the heel of her palm rams into his chest.

Steve’s father had once told him, as a child, that he “fucking punches like a girl.” To which Steve had shouted that he hated him, to which he has been called a sissy, so Steve has half the mind to introduce Nami to his father just to prove that getting punched by A Certified Girl is similar to dropping a fifteen-pound dumbbell on your chest.

By the time he comes around, Steve is standing at the feet of his own body.

“Holy shit, I am not drunk enough for this,” is the first sentence out of his mouth.

“Definitely takes some getting used to,” says Nami, standing next to him. They’re lying side-by-side in pebbled dirt, Steve’s police cap knocked askew. He’s also spread-eagled, like he’d been knocked out with a punch. Well, he had been, so.

Nami, in comparison, is the picture of leisure with her hands

pillowed behind her head and her ankle crossed over bent knee. She looks like she's taking a catnap.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm having an out of body experience."

"Word. Real funny, Harrington."

"You couldn't have made me look like less of an idiot?"

"Nope. Come on."

The descent into the Darker is going on Steve's list of scarier things he's done. Nami holds out her hand and it's comforting to know she's there even when they plunge into the mist and into total blackness.

"You come out here yourself all the time?"

"Not all the time. A few times I've done it with Eya, you know, the power copycat. And I wouldn't have come out here alone if it weren't for what Ife found out about Brenner."

"Brenner? What'd she hear?"

"She has nerves of steel, you have to give her that." Nami's laugh echoes. "From what they've told me, Brenner is in the abandoned lab in Hawkins when he's not in here, moving between the dark dimensions. And he's a bit of a loudmouth. He likes to make his plans aloud to one of his henchman, Ray."

"Don't tell me she's been sneaking into the lab to eavesdrop."

"Hey, if I could make myself invisible, I would eavesdrop on the goddamn president."

"You can already do that."

"That's true." She hums. "He wants to make El one of his."

"As in, what, he wants to do what the shadow monster did to Will last year?"

“Think about it. Will was a threat to your lives and this entire city, and he’s just a small-town, normal boy. Imagine what El would be capable of.”

Steve shivers.

“Yeah.”

“Is that all he wants? Seems like an awful lot of theatrics to get one person.”

“It’s not that simple, I guess. I guess what happened at the gate last year, there must have been some kind of altercation between her and the monster that lives in him now. If he can’t get her back he’ll destroy her.”

“Not to be heartless, but she’s still just one person.”

“Yes, perhaps that’s true.” Nami’s sigh feels loud around them, and the weightlessness of the darkness becomes unnerving. “But I don’t think that’s what the monster is looking for. Killing someone isn’t really the best way to make them suffer. It’s destroying everything that they live for.”

A smothered silence befalls them when Steve understands what she’s saying.

“If he can’t get Eleven, he’ll kill everything she lives for.”

“So it would seem.”

“I’m gonna throw up,” Steve says.

“Just don’t do it on me, and we’re cool.”

He doesn’t get around to it. Though it’s still dark, their feet meet solid ground, and Nami drops his hand and begins walking. “Come along, we don’t have all day.”

“Where is this?”

“The afterlife. It’s the kindest dimension to pass through.”

A faint blue light winks at them in the distance, quiet and sleepy. The silhouette of Nami's body beside him becomes visible when they draw closer, and the light falls over them.

"You've been here with Eya?"

"Not to this place precisely. It changes sometimes."

"I thought heaven would be brighter than this."

The light belongs to the sign outside a laundromat. A gentle smell of fabric softener hangs in the air.

"You just have to know where to look, hot stuff. Come on."

There are shadowy, almost-solid figures standing between washing machines and dryers, busying themselves with detergent and quarters and laundry baskets. Steve smiles at a boy who hides behind his mother's skirt, but feels his heart contract when he remembers that this is the afterlife. That everyone here is frozen at the age they had passed.

But at the end of the aisle, there is a girl with head full of flame-red curls, holding up a coffee-stained gingham shirt with a frown. Steve balks.

"Barb?"

She turns to them.

"Steve? Steve Harrington?"

"You know her?" Nami says, pointing.

"Yeah, she—" Steve looks between Nami and Barb, then lets his feet carry him to her. "Barb, are you—I mean, I'm so sorry, I—"

"Are you dead, too?"

"I—me? No, I—this is my friend, Nami. She can, well, this is going to sound absolutely out of my fucking mind, but our souls can visit the afterlife because of what she can do. How are you? I mean, you're—"

you're here, so you're. Not that great?" God, Steve, get it the fuck together, "I'm so sorry, we did everything to find you. There's this girl, Eleven, we call her El. She found you in the Upside Down and we did everything we could to bring your death to justice. We buried you."

"Thanks, Steve," she says. There's genuine gratitude in her words. "I know. I know what happened."

"You were the one I saw in the fog," Nami says. "That day, by the cemetery. You said my name."

Barb smiles, confused. "I'm sorry?"

"It was you, right? You were there, in the middle of the road. I crashed my car to avoid you, you called me One. Wasn't it you? Glasses, tall, red hair. It was you."

"It wasn't me," says Barb. "I have not left this place since death."

Nami shares a glance with Steve.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

Barb turns away from them, and Nami motions for Steve to follow.

"The dead don't like to speak with the living too much."

"No?"

"There's a reason we're separated by dimensions. Time moves on without them and they respect that law."

"What was it that she said that made you so nervous? About the day at the cemetery."

"If it wasn't Barb, the soul of the real Barb that I saw in the fog, then who could it have been?"

"Beats me."

“Remember what I told you about Limbo? It is a dark, demonic reflection of the same reality we know. If it wasn’t the real Barb, then what if it was Limbo Barb? Not that I’ve ever seen anyone but the Doctor escape it, but say they managed. Say they did, because it looks like we can’t rule out any possibilities now.”

“Something in the mist,” Steve says, remembering what Thirteen had said that day they’d met Eleven and Mike at Hopper’s cabin, Nami in tow. “Maybe it was them. People from Limbo.”

“They come and go, the Limbo ones. We see them, sometimes. They don’t bother us.”

Someone is talking to them. It’s a girl, around the corner, sitting with her legs crossed on one of the laundromat benches. She’s angel-haired and cradles a stuffed tiger, and *Anne of Green Gables* lies open in her lap.

“Four?” says Nami. “Four, is that—?”

“I remember you!” Four says, a smile springing to her lips. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I remember your name.”

“It’s okay. I was always One in the lab, but it’s Nanami now.”

“Nanami,” she repeats, and turns to Steve. “And, you are?”

“Steve Harrington.” There’s something about Four that he can’t place.

“Nice to meet you, Steve. My name was Four, but you can call me Sara. Sara Hopper.”

By the time Mike gets home, a headache has settled in at his temples.

The plan is for him to go in through the basement door and for the rest of them—Will, Max, Lucas, Eleven, and Dustin, and Thirteen had said he needed to go—to come in through the front door to rescue him from solitary confinement. If Karen Wheeler is unconvinced by the show, because Dustin is a horrible actor, she says nothing, because five pairs of feet start rumbling down the basement stairs just

after sunset.

“Hi again, Mike,” Dustin says, far too cheerfully for this headache. Mike groans in acknowledgement where he’s facedown on the couch right now, feet hanging off the end.

“Mike, why are you like that?” Eleven asks, stepping around Dustin on the stairs to take the rest down two at a time.

“Yeah Mike, you’re inhaling dust mites by the hundreds like that,” Max says.

“I’m trying to die in peace.”

“That is not going to happen, look at me.” Eleven bodily flips him on the couch without touching him, and the shock of being manhandled is enough for the migraine to lessen a hair. Mike grabs onto the couch to ensure he’s not moving anymore. Eleven’s hands are cool and dry on his cheeks, but it feels hard to even get her face into focus. There’s concern in it, and a lot of it. “What is wrong?”

“Migraine.”

“Days since last nonsense. Zero,” Lucas says, collapsing in one of the chairs by their game table. “We need to tell Hopper what Thirteen told us today. We have a week, maybe less, to be ready for the psycho’s next visit.”

“And whatever Thirteen showed Mike. I don’t like the sound of it,” says Max. “And, what the hell, is that Nancy’s stuff over there? What’s it doing here?”

Mike shuts his eyes at the bright light that hangs over the game table. The cushions beside him sink when Eleven settles down beside him, sliding her hand down the inside of his arm until he opens his hand for hers. “Storage,” he says, and leaves it at that.

“Bad guys laughing is always a bad sign,” Will says.

“We need to tell Hopper, but you know who else we need to tell?” says Lucas.

“Enlighten us,” Dustin says.

“That doctor who treated Will. Dr. Owens, I think? Right, El?”

Eleven nods.

“According to El, he got her documents. He’s the only sane doctor from that lab. Who knows, what if he actually knows something about Brenner that we don’t?” Lucas says.

“Really?” Max raises her eyebrows, arms crossed over her chest. She outdoes Lucas, even, in the skepticism department.

“You can’t forget they studied this stuff. Sure, maybe they didn’t tango with a full-grown Demogorgon, but they willingly walked into that shit and took notes on it.”

“Mike, you look seriously green around the gills. You should, I dunno. Take a Tylenol.”

“M’fine,” he says, not fine at all.

“Fine? You are not fine,” Eleven says, head resting on his shoulder. “You are lying.”

“You looked like you got falcon punched earlier,” Dustin says helpfully.

“I mean, considering Thirteen intended the message for El?” Max says. “Mike’s an eggshell in comparison.”

“Screw you, Max,” though Mike sounds so weak to his own ears that Max doesn’t snipe back.

“If he meant it for El, I guess he goes really easy on us.” Will rests his chin in his hand. “El, he hasn’t shown you anything that—I don’t know, we should know about, right?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“He’s shown you stuff? No fair, I wanna know what it’s like,” Max says.

“Not fun,” Mike says.

“He doesn’t hit me so hard?” Will ventures.

“He probably likes you,” Lucas says.

“What—he does not!”

“Thirteen likes Will!” Dustin crows. “Thirteen likes Will, Thirteen likes Will—”

Max and Lucas join in on the chanting. It’s almost too much, the sound pounding on the inside of Mike’s skull, before the door to the basement opens and his mother calls down the stairs

“Mike! I ordered KFC for you and your friends.”

“KFC? I love you Mrs. Wheeler, please adopt me!” Dustin leaps to. “Last one upstairs is a rotten goose!”

“Mike.” Will brings up the rear, the other three disappearing upstairs with a thundering of sneakers. He has one hand on the rail halfway up the flight of stairs. “Aren’t you going to come?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“El?”

“I’ll stay down here.”

“Okay, we’ll save you some,” says Will, and Mike can feel Eleven’s tiny smile more than he sees it.

Then, it’s quiet.

“You should go eat, El.”

“Not hungry either,” she says, just as her stomach growls like a wounded tiger in her belly. Mike cracks open one eye to look at her, smile tugging on the corner of his lips.

“Lie.”

“I could not eat knowing you’re unwell.”

“You’re just going to sit here and watch me mold?”

“Well, I don’t have to watch you,” Eleven says. Mike feels her lean in and press a kiss to his cheekbone, and it’s enough to make him open his eyes in earnest and look towards her. Warmth creeps up his neck, but she’s already stood up, interested in Nancy’s pile of odds and ends that he’d brought down here this morning.

“Nancy is leaving soon,” she says.

“It’s weird how time passes so fast,” Mike says. “I still remember when she started at Hawkins High. She got so annoying.”

“I don’t think she is annoying.”

“You didn’t know her three years ago.”

“Hmm,” Eleven says, picking up an old scrapbook. She flips through it. Mike knows the one; it’s one he remembers Nancy working on all the time, putting photos of herself and Barb and movie tickets into. Come to think of it, a lot of the contents in the box probably fall under Barb Stuff. He feels a touch of remorse for complaining about moving it today.

The silence is only broken by the noises of dinner upstairs—chair feet scraping the floor, Dustin’s booming voice. Holly’s pitter-patter when she gets up to get her own juice. It’s comfortable white noise, punctuated by the noise of Eleven turning pages.

“Mike.”

“Hm?”

Eleven does not reply. He turns to where she sits cross-legged on the floor. “What?”

“Come here.”

“What’d you find?” Mike peels himself off the couch, but it doesn’t look like it’s something that she found in the scrapbook that she

wants to share. Instead, she's staring straight ahead into the corner where he had leaned Nancy's mirror. She points at it.

"Look."

Their reflections blink back at them.

"What am I supposed to be seeing?"

"Look," she repeats. She raises her right arm. Her reflection does the same. Then she puts it down.

Her reflection does not.

Mike stumbles back, as Eleven's reflection smiles, waving her hand back and forth slow and steady, before lowering it.

"What the fuck?" he chokes. "Did you see that?"

"I did." She turns to him, and her reflection follows her faithfully this time. "You try it?"

Woodenly, Mike raises his hand, too, and waves it. His reflection does the same. He tries it with his other hand and it follows.

"It's not doing it for me."

His reflection smiles when he doesn't, and Eleven scuttles back.

"Oh my God."

They jump when the mirror rattles, as though someone had punched it from behind. It rattles again, alive, and then bloody handprints begin to appear on the glass, one by one at first, then by the dozens, pressing only briefly but leaving behind thick smudges of blood.

And, impossibly, through the gore, their reflections reach out of the glass. Not all the way, not enough to be real, but real enough for Eleven to shriek and Mike to stumble and trip over backwards on the fringe of the old carpet. Initially it's only their own hands that grab for them, but then their arms and elbows appear, then their faces. Mike's stomach roils when he looks at himself, but it's not really him,

hanging out of a bloody mirror.

Eleven puts her hand up and the mirror groans. Her nose bleeds.

The noise carries Mike's feet forward. He stumbles over the scrapbook, forgotten on the floor, and slaps his hands over his and Eleven's reflections, shouting as he pushes it back into the glass. Hands flail and grasp onto his shirt and he can feel Eleven's power at his back, and he shoves with all his might until they vanish back inside the glass. His hands meet the mirror with a force strong enough that it shatters into a thousand pieces, and he pulls them away as pain shoots all the way up to his shoulders.

Shards of it rain to the floor, *plink-plink*, as the dust settles.

"Mike!" Eleven says, scrambling to her feet. "You should have let me, why did you—your hands—"

He opens them. Glittering grit clings to his broken skin, and the dull throb of his pulse makes his fingers feel thick and clumsy. Eleven takes his wrists gently and surveys the damage. Her hands are trembling, and it's a weird comfort to know that Mike isn't the only one that's scared shitless.

The mirror is empty now, nothing but a battered wooden board and pile of silvery glass on the floor. It's going to be one hell of a sweep job. Mike stares into it, and Eleven follows the direction of his gaze.

"What the hell was that?" he asks. Though the mirror stands still and innocuous now, he almost thinks he can hear a mishmash of whispering voices.

Eleven closes her hands over his, unflinching when his blood smears in her palms.

"I think it was us," she breathes.

"Really?"

Eleven nods.

"From Limbo."

## Notes for the Chapter:

ost for the chapter is [hourglass - survive!](#)

i'm not a big fan of mirrors, i'm not going to lie

thanks for reading and i'll work hard on chapter 6!!

^o^

## 6. the pale king

### Summary for the Chapter:

in the sleepy harvest city of hawkins, indiana, there is a sickness that has never healed.

### Notes for the Chapter:

wow things really happen in this one lads! buckle up!! also thank you everyone for your patience ^-^ this chapter was a doozy to write!!

**content warnings:** violence, blood

Not many things would actually be able to bring Max to openly express concern for Mike Wheeler. An abridged list includes, and is fairly limited to, if he were hit by a car, if he were hit by a train, or if he looked like he stuck his hands in a blender. Most of this stuff easily could happen because he's a bit of a dumbass (see: literally everything the boys did before she showed up), but Max has quiet faith in him. And Eleven. Mostly Eleven.

She doesn't let Mike know any of this, obviously.

But right now it looks like he stuck his hands in a blender, so Max doesn't feel too bad about shouting, "What the hell! Are you okay? What did you even do?"

Eleven looks up, a small trickle of blood at her nose, when the door bangs open and hallway light tumbles in a glowing carpet down the flight of stairs. She's cloaked in the shadows of the darkening basement and appears so small, but Mike winces beside her with his hands curled in his lap.

At first Max thinks, for a wild moment, that he doesn't *have* hands anymore, and is about to scream at the tops of her lungs—but then she realizes that they just look like hunks of raw meat. Except, not the kind you can find prepackaged in Big Buy. So this isn't much of an improvement.

“What’s going—holy fuck,” Dustin says when he leans around her. “Mike! There was a bunch of shouting and we heard a big crash, what did you even do?”

“He punched a mirror.” Lucas shoulders past them all just far enough to see the shattered glass on the floor. When they open the door wider the light falls upon it, and the pieces wink back at them like a shard of chipped Indiana sky at midnight. “You want to explain, Mike? Someone go get the first aid.”

The disappearing sound of footsteps, then Will’s voice as he stumbles his way through a lie when Mike’s mom asks what he needs gauze for.

“There were people in the mirror,” says Eleven. Mike does not look fit to be explaining anything. He is the eggshell, after all.

“Yeah, there usually are. It’s called your reflection,” says Max.

“Not a reflection. It was us, but it was not. They had our faces, but moving, when we moved, they did not move as we did. The things we did, they didn’t.”

Will comes down the stairs with a first aid kit, dropping it at his feet. Eleven gets to work immediately, and Max settles herself cross-legged beside her to help. It’s clear she knows how to bandage wounds, but her hands are shaking so badly that the tweezers rattle in the box.

“Go wash your hands,” Max says. She’s never been squeamish about blood, but Mike’s hands are so caked with it that he looks like he’s wearing gloves.

He casts his gaze to the bathroom door apprehensively. It stands ajar.

“I’ll come with you,” Eleven says. But Max can see it when she helps him up—they’re scared. There’s a mirror in the bathroom.

“I’ll come too,” she says, getting to her feet. Dustin shoots her a puzzled expression. So does Lucas.

Max intercepts them and pushes the door open. The light comes on with a flick. The mirror is dusty, and has toothpaste smears on it

from all their sleepovers, but she stays resolutely, unforgivingly herself in the glass: cheeks red, as always, hair a mess.

“You guys are good.”

“Thanks, Max.”

“Can’t let anything scare you, El, you might make the plumbing explode in the walls.”

Eleven still smiles, albeit a small one, but it’s a good sign. She takes Mike’s wrists and turns the faucet on, holding his bloody hands under the stream of water as he hisses and grits his teeth against the sting. Max cuts him some slack. When the water loosens the clods of blood, the gashes go deep.

She leans on the doorframe with her arms crossed. “Did you guys know what it was?”

“Huh?”

“Your reflections, not following you. Let me guess—you freaked out and punched the mirror?”

“No, it was more than that. Ow,” Mike says. Eleven murmurs her apologies and runs her finger over his palms, where the bleeding is the worst.

“What do you mean?”

“Our reflections not following us wasn’t the scary part.”

Max listens mutely as Mike recounts the story. In the time she has grown with these boys, she’s come to learn a few things—that they all want to do what’s right, and what’s best for each other, even if their opinions on what’s right and best for each other diverge. That they’re four quarters of a whole. That they really don’t lie, and as much as she and Mike exchange words like they’re arguing, she knows he’s telling the truth about the bloody handprints and the hands coming out of the mirror to grab them.

“El thinks it’s us from Limbo,” Mike finishes. The sound of water

ceases. Eleven takes Mike's hands in her own so gently that Max thinks she should probably skedaddle, but he's still talking, and doesn't seem to have the energy to be embarrassed. Which is enough to make Max silently concerned for him. "If Nami says it's a place just like this one, where danger hides in the familiar, then that seems like our best answer right now."

Max thinks. Eleven pats Mike's hands dry, turning them over in hers so she can catch all the moisture. The paper towels still come away bloodstained. At least his hands don't look like Sloppy Joes attached to the ends of his arms now, so it's a step up.

"Limbo can reach us through mirrors?"

"Not just mirrors."

"Storm drains too, then."

Eleven and Mike both fall silent. Max remembers that afternoon, the two of them showing up like skittish kittens at Will's door. Blood, they'd kept repeating. They'd been covered in blood, so they said, but Max had even put her hands on Eleven's sleeves and to her hair and it all felt as clean and dry as it looked.

"Maybe," Mike says, in a voice that sounds like he wants to say yes but doesn't want to hear himself say it.

"Mike." Max looks between him and Eleven. "You need to be more careful." She jerks her chin at his hands. "Neosporin for the pain."

Okay, that's enough vocal concern for the year.

Jonathan wakes up early in the morning on his stomach. He reaches into the side of his bed, heart sinking when it's cold before he remembers that Nancy had needed to take off late last night. His mom had gotten a call from the Wheelers, asking Nancy to come home right away to watch Holly.

"Why?" Jonathan asked. "Your dad isn't home?"

“My idiot brother needs stitches for some reason. On his hands,” Nancy said, shrugging on her cardigan. She was prickly to the touch and kept up an unbroken stream of curses through putting on her shoes, too, but Jonathan knew she was worried. She stared out the window of the passenger side of his car the whole way to her house in silence.

Jonathan has to wonder what Mike could have done. Taken a great fall, perhaps. Mike’s not much of the rough and tumble type, so it seems unlikely even so.

He yawns, rolling out of bed for the bathroom. It’s early. Will’s door is already open a crack, and Jonathan looks down the hall. A weak light illuminates the kitchen, and not even his mother sounds like she’s awake yet.

“Will? You up, buddy?”

The hinges squeak when he pushes it open gently. There is no Will in the bed, just a tangle of blankets, and—

“Thirteen?”

A frozen sort of expression tightens across Thirteen’s face when he looks up. He sits cross-legged on the floor with a book, which is fairly harmless. It’s just that Jonathan has no idea how he got into the house to begin with, where Will is, and why he’s here in silence.

“What the hell are you doing here? It’s barely sunrise!”

“Uh,” he says.

The sound of a toilet flushing funnels through the walls, and Jonathan looks over his shoulder when Will comes out of the bathroom that Jonathan had gotten up to use in the first place. Will, too, balks when he sees Jonathan in his doorway, body going rigid.

“Will, did you let Thirteen in?”

Will looks like he’s on the cusp of panicking.

“Hey, listen, I won’t tell Mom! Don’t worry. I just wanted to know if

he'd gotten in because you were okay with it."

"Yeah, I—I let him in," Will says. "He's a morning person."

"And I always thought you were the type to sleep till noon," Jonathan said, giving Will's head a noogie. "Don't be too loud. I'm going to try to catch some more shuteye."

"It's, uhm, not what it looks like!"

Jonathan has one foot in the bathroom already. Will's head peeks out from between the door and the doorframe, concern still lingering in his face, and Jonathan waves him away.

"Don't worry about it, bud."

"Doesn't look like what?"

The door clicks when Will shuts it. His forehead thuds against the wood when he leans into it, hitting his head lightly over and over. *Tnk. Tnk. Tnk.*

"Why?"

"Never mind. It's whatever."

Thirteen is still cross-legged on the floor with a copy of *Turn Left at Orion*, which Eleven had liked, too. She'd pored over it with the singular goal of learning everything she could about black holes, and Will had humored her, unsure where the fascination came from but happy to tell her what he knew. Which was a lot.

"Not whatever."

"Huh?"

"Written in your face."

Will's hand still rests on the doorknob, and he crosses his room to climb back into his bed. He sits like Thirteen, cross-legged, at the edge of his mattress.

"I just don't want him to think I'm weird, or tell Mom."

"Tell your mom you're weird?"

"No, she knows I'm weird. No—that's not what I mean. I, ugh. It's." Will gestures uselessly. His heart is pounding in his cheeks, so loud it drowns out his thoughts and makes them fragmented. "It's just weird. For, you know, two guys to have a sleepover?"

Thirteen blinks.

"But you have sleepovers with four guys."

"Yeah, but—"

"Makes it grotesque?"

"No!"

"Not following," Thirteen says, frown starting to tug on the corners of his lips.

Will holds his two hands apart like he's trying to measure the length of an invisible rod, trying to picture himself holding the sense he will not make saying the next sentence. "Four is okay, two isn't."

"Because?"

"It means," oh, Jesus, he'd really rather stick his hands in hot oil, eat a cockroach or something, "that you like each other."

"Okay," says Thirteen.

"Okay?"

"Don't want you to hate me."

"As in, like each other the way Mike and El do."

"I know." Thirteen shrugs. He's already done with this conversation and it shows, because he turns his attention back to his book. "Okay."

"But." Will is perplexed by how blase Thirteen is. "I'm a guy, you're a

guy.”

“Yeah.”

“And sleeping over means you like each other. I mean, usually.”

“I know.”

“Well, you didn’t before.”

“I know, now.”

“And you’re just, ‘okay’?”

“Should’ve said something else?” Thirteen asks, eyebrows knitting together.

“Aren’t you grossed out? Or think it’s weird?”

“Nothing weird about it.”

Will still has his hands held apart, still measuring his imaginary rod. “Wait, so you’re okay with Jonathan having this misconception, or are you admitting that you—I mean.”

Thirteen only looks at him. There it is, his intense, hard-to-meet gaze. Will diverts his own.

“That you don’t mind me, or something,” Will finishes lamely.

“Both.”

Will blinks up at him. Thirteen continues to be grandly unruffled by this entire conversation.

“You saw this happening.”

This much makes him pay attention.

“No.”

“Then how are you so calm!”

“Did not see this conversation. Knew a conversation like this would happen for what I saw to happen.” That coy smile that Thirteen had offered the firefighter, and the same one when he knows something that Will doesn’t know yet, starts upon his face. Will has come to love it, just a little. It’s a bit like a promise of a surprise. A good one. He needs more of those, honestly.

“Then what?” Will asks, unable to keep the smile off his own mouth.

“You’ll see.”

“Okay.”

“Promise.”

Eleven wakes up with the floor at her back. The birdsong over her head, she hasn’t heard before. This one goes up-up-down-leedle dee, leedle doo. The one that she hears in Hopper’s cabin every morning without fail is up!-down-down-down-phweet!

The creak of bedsprings, and Eleven opens her eyes. Oh yes. This is Nancy’s room. She is sleeping on the floor of Nancy’s room. This had not been part of the plan. Not that there was one. When she and Will had started to bandage Mike’s hands, the deepest gash in the skin between his thumb and index finger had begun bleeding bright red and crazy. Mike’s face had gone green and grey at the sight of it.

So, hospital. She hates hospitals. She hates them a lot, but Mike climbed into the car with his mother and father holding his hands to his chest like he was scared to move them, and she had said, “I am coming too.”

“Elle—”

“She’s coming,” Mike had said.

White, it was too white. Everything was straight and white and bright, with wheels on the beds and wires. Mike winced and made noises of distress all through the stitching and the needle they used looked more like a fishhook than a needle, and all of it made her

want to vomit on her own shoes.

But Mike needed her more than she needed to vomit, so she held his elbow, because his hands were hurt, until it was over.

Nancy's floral quilt falls away when Eleven sits up. She spreads her hands on it, soft. Nancy is still asleep, her curly hair dark on her pillow. Eleven was allowed to stay over because it was late but she wasn't allowed to be in Mike's room.

Well, she's awake now, and it's a free country according to Mr. President Reagan!

Nothing moves when Eleven tiptoes into the hallway. It reminds her a bit of how she'd explored the Wheeler house two years ago, on little cat feet, when no one had been home. Mike's room is the next one down the hall. The knob is cold and makes a rumble noise when she turns it.

A lump on Mike's bed where his body is. It's dark, the curtains are drawn, so she can just see the outline of his body in the blankets. He is a fetus-sleeper. That's what the psychology book called this position, curling up in a little c or like a shrimp. Eleven is one, too. But sometimes she is a log sleeper.

Mike is curled so tight into his blankets that Eleven can really only see a tuft of dark hair, but he has his hands outside of the covers. The bandages are stained. He doesn't move when she eases in beside him and stretches her body out on the bed. They knocked him out with some strong drugs so he would sleep, it was called Vicodin. He wouldn't sleep. She had a hard time sleeping, too, but she didn't get any Vicodin. Every time she closed her eyes she'd see herself in the mirror, laughing when she didn't. Nancy even offered to hang a sheet over her vanity mirror, so Eleven appreciates her a lot.

She shimmies in so close she can hear him breathe. So Eleven closes her eyes, matching her breath to his. In, out. In, out. In. Pause, out.

"El?"

He is awake.

“Are you feeling okay?”

At first Mike doesn't look like he even understands the question. “Okay?” he asks. His voice is scratchy and sleepy, and muffled because his mouth is still in the covers.

She takes his hands like she's cradling robin's eggs. “Hurts?” The question is gratuitous, really. His face creases as soon as she does, like coming to means he remembers he has hands. Really torn up ones.

“Ugh, they itch. And they burn.”

“I can go get something. I will get it. Tylenol?”

“No, not yet. I'll hold out a little longer.”

“But you are in pain.”

“Yeah, but you're here, so it doesn't hurt as bad.”

Eleven flicks her gaze up at his face. Too late does Mike seem to realize what he said, and tries to bury his face back into his covers. They smell like him. “Or something,” he mumbles.

“Stop it.”

“Huh?”

“Now you are the one giving me butterflies.”

Mike laughs, and the sound is all slurred and runny. “Didn't mean to. I think I'm still coming off the meds, I had some crazy dreams just now.”

“Bad crazy or good crazy?”

“Weird crazy.”

“Millennium Falcon again?”

“Unfortunately not,” Mike says.

"I had a dream about you. Except you didn't look like you, you were way older. Old like, even older than Nami."

"Already weird. How did you know it was me?"

"I don't know." Mike frowns. "I guess I just did."

"Well," Eleven is curious now. "What'd I say?"

"Nothing," Mike says. "That's the weird part. You just put your hand on my shoulder. Actually, no, scratch that. The weirdest part was that you were taller than me, just a little. But you were. Major weird? You just put your hand on my shoulder and I turned to look at you, and —"

He trails off.

"And?" prompts Eleven.

"It just made me sad." A soft quiet settles over them, and Mike withdraws himself back into his cocoon. "Never mind, sorry. I'm not even all the way awake yet."

Mike is, admittedly, feverish to the touch when Eleven reaches out and fits her hand to his cheek. He shivers at the contact, eyes darting down as if he has to confirm she's really touching him.

"I don't want to make you sad."

"You never make me sad."

"I made you sad. For three hundred fifty three days, I did."

And Mike does not lie and say no, he wasn't sad. Because he was, and he knows she saw it, too. But the both of them know that it wasn't a sadness that was the fault of either them, no matter how many times they circle back to this question. *Could I have done better? Could I have? Could I, really?*

There are not words nor stitches that can heal old pain. In time, Eleven knows, it will become a scar before they realize it has stopped hurting. The scar will fade and one day it'll only be a memory.

Mike pulls down the edge of his blankets so that he can turn his face. He puts a kiss to the inside of Eleven's wrist, right where her old tattoo is. The touch is so soft it feels like eyelashes on her skin.

It says a lot of things that they don't know how to say, without saying anything at all. It's okay. I know. You did your best, I did my best. There are no more tears. Thank you.

The Vicodin must still linger in Mike's blood, because his eyes flutter closed. Eleven thinks he is just basking in the quiet of the morning, except his breathing deepens and slows in a way that seems like he hadn't slept all night. Maybe he hadn't. His hands are hot and tender to the touch and Eleven wonders if she should get some ice, at least, for the pain. A good idea. There should be ice in the freezer.

Ah, shoot. Karen is already awake. Eleven stands at the stairway landing, watching her cook at the stove with her back to stairs. Karen is interesting, which Hopper says is adult code for stupid, but Eleven means interesting. She does not have much in common with Karen, but she loves Mike a lot, so she cannot be that bad.

She turns and her hand jumps to her heart. "Elle! You scared me, I didn't hear you come down."

There's a pan of something sizzling. Eggs. Eleven wonders how good Karen's eggs are in comparison to Hopper's, she usually only gets to eat Karen's dinners. "Help, did you need it?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine. Are you hungry? Is Mike awake, do you know?"

"He is sleeping still."

"Did you check on him?"

Eleven hesitates to answer. She wasn't allowed to sleep in his room, so maybe she wasn't supposed to go in at all. But she nods, and relief crosses Karen's face.

"Good, sleep is good," she says. "Here, why don't you eat something and you can call the chief. I called into the station last night to tell him you were at our house and not to worry, but he didn't pick up, so

I had to call the cabin in the woods. He sounded drunk.”

“Bad.”

“Yeah. I think he misses you.”

“Misses me,” Eleven repeats.

“Sure. He must be used to having you around.”

Eleven helps Karen in the kitchen anyway even though she says she doesn’t need it. The eggs need cheese and pepper so she retrieves the block from the fridge and the grinder from the island. Karen is in just slippers and a bathrobe, cooking enough for only the two of them, and sets down a bottle of ketchup in front of Eleven when they finish. Eggs and toast and even bacon, that’s the special stuff. The Sunday stuff.

“Eat, you had a long night, too.”

So Eleven dutifully eats.

Their forks and knives clink in silence for a while as Eleven thinks about the ice in the freezer. Maybe she can sneak some upstairs without Karen noticing. But, wait. There’s nothing she needs to hide about any of this—Karen knows Mike is hurt, Karen knows she’s here.

Eleven is not quite accustomed, still, to living life in the open.

“I wanted to say thank you, Elle.”

It takes her a moment to realize that Karen is speaking to her. She blinks and looks up.

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

Eleven does not understand. “Why?”

Karen very carefully picks up some egg on her fork. “Before you met Mike, he had a bad year. I’m sure he’s told you more about it than

he's told me, but before even that, one of his friends, Will—he vanished. Into what seemed like thin air. We all thought he'd passed, but he came back. You probably know this, too. I'm not sure what had been botched, but I was just thankful that Will returned, and happy to go back to the way things were."

Eleven struggles to arrange her face into one of someone who is hearing this for the first time.

"But they didn't. They never did. Will came back, and I was so happy, but the Mike I knew never did. It was like a part of him that I never noticed, until it was gone. And he became someone I didn't recognize. I didn't know what to say or do, but then you showed up." She reaches for her knife to cut into her toast. "You showed up and he's—well, not perfect. But he was okay again. Even if things are difficult, he's okay. His hands are butchered but he keeps telling me everything is fine and I know it's because of you. That is why I owe you thanks."

"Oh," Eleven says. She does not know what to say to all this. *You're welcome* is what you're supposed to say to thank you, but it feels inadequate (*adjective*. Lacking the quality and quantity required). "It is my pleasure." That sounds a little better. She hears this sometimes, when people are really serious about responding to thank yous.

Karen just smiles.

She tells Eleven to give Hopper a call after breakfast, that she wants to check on Mike, so she'll bring the ice. This makes sense. Eleven knows she's not the only person in Mike's life who cares about him, and just watches as Karen ascends the staircase before helping herself to their phone.

It should be late enough for Hopper to be in the station now.

"Hello, Hawkins police department."

"Steve."

"If it isn't my girl Jane Hopper," Steve singsongs. "You wanna talk to the chief?"

“Is he in?”

“Yeah, looking like he needs a fry-up. Here he is.”

“’Lo?”

“Hop. It’s me.”

“Yeah, I know.” He clears his throat. “Wheelers give you a place to sleep last night? How’s Mike?”

“Yes. Not good.”

“What happened, can you say?”

“Not sure.”

“Yeah, best not to. I’ll come get you later today and we need to talk.”

“Okay.” Eleven pauses. “You are not mad.”

“You want me to be?”

“I was gone all night.”

“Thirteen and Karen told me where you were. It’s not like I could have made you come home with me even if I showed up, not with Wheeler in that state. I’m not mad. I’m just sorry.”

“Why?”

“I should have been there.” Hopper says this in his tired voice and Eleven wishes she could reach out and take his hand. “No, there’s something I should have told you.”

“Here, take this.”

Lucas thrusts another bar of Snickers into Dustin’s arms. He’s already laden with a bag of Lays, a slightly soggy box of pudding pops, Reese’s on Reese’s, and now the Snickers, which just barely balances on the small mountain of peanut butter cups that they already have

going.

“Oh, and this.” Lucas sets down a trio of bananas upon the pile.

“Are you sure Mike even likes bananas?” Dustin says, face just barely visible over the food. “He never eats them when I bring them over.”

“Well, that’s because you also bring enough M&M’s to fill a bathtub, none of us are going to eat the bananas,” Lucas says.

They have to spread the change thin between the two of them to pay for all of it, and Lucas hands the handfuls of coins over as Dustin shovels them all into his backpack. The cashier watches them with a touch of weariness on his face as Lucas painstakingly counts out his nickels, like he knows he could help but doesn’t have the energy to bring himself to.

“Thanks!”

The air is hot and soupy in the way it had been when they’d first finished middle school, and Dustin pulls his backpack straps tighter around his shoulders. “The chocolate’s going to melt before we make it back to his house,” he says. Metal clinks as he unlocks his bike from the racks. “Hey, what’re you looking at?”

Lucas is squatted down by the storm drain outside of the Big Buy, and Dustin comes to a stop beside him. “I said, what are you looking at?”

“Remember what Mike and El said about this drain?” Lucas squints up at Dustin, one eye screwed shut against the sear of the sun. “The blood.”

A somber expression crosses Dustin’s face, and he crouches low too.

“I don’t see anything,” he says.

“Yeah, I don’t either.” Lucas reaches out and runs a finger along the grates, then on the underside of the sidewalk where it hangs over the drain. His fingertip collects some dust and dirt, which he wipes on his jeans, but nothing anywhere near to how dried blood would look.

“You don’t think they were just making it up?”

“Dustin, come on. This is Mike and El we’re talking about here, and even if Mike was going to lie, you know El wouldn’t. Plus, their level of freaked out isn’t something they could fake.”

“It just doesn’t make sense.”

“You think I’m saying it does? How could they see something and we can’t? And why did that mirror thing happen when we weren’t around last night, was it that much of a coincidence? Maybe if this happened two years ago my answer would be yes, but it’s a hell no now.”

“It isn’t a coincidence.”

Lucas jumps at the voice just behind them. It’s the creepy twins, and one of them is picking a banana off the bunch that he and Dustin had just bought.

“Hey! That’s for our friend!”

“We haven’t eaten since two dinners ago,” says Eya. She has golden eyes, like a housecat, the more talkative of the two. She looks from Lucas to Dustin. Some part of Lucas wants to argue, but he’s not sure he wants to pick a fight with supernaturals that he doesn’t know very well. Which is everyone out of Eleven and Thirteen. “Problem?”

“Mike’s hurt. We bought that with our own money for him.”

Eya looks between Lucas and Ife, hand on the banana stalk to unpeel it. “As you wish,” she says, handing it back.

“No fair, why do you listen to him,” Dustin says. He opens the mouth of his backpack, unsure how they’d managed to steal them out of his bag unnoticed to begin with, and Eya tosses it inside.

“Because he could be our little brother,” Eya says.

Lucas snorts at the gobsmacked look that comes over Dustin’s face. It sure is a trip to get smashed into a wall by his girlfriend’s douchebag stepbrother because of who he is, only to turn around and get

supernatural favoritism for the same reason.

“Dustin’s great too, okay,” Lucas says anyway. “You should listen to the keeper of snacks.”

“What did you guys mean, though.” Dustin looks up into Ife’s face. She’s tall, both of them are, in a gangly way. “How do you know it wasn’t a coincidence?”

“He is doing this. Papa is doing this.”

Lucas exchanges a glance with Dustin.

“He’s doing—what, exactly?”

“Those from the Upside Down. Those from Limbo. Those from the afterlife. They follow his whims and wishes. They can sense Eleven and Michael. They are targeting them specifically.”

“We know that,” Lucas says. “But why them, and why only them?”

“You want to be targeted?” says Eya.

“No! Just that, why? We want to help them, but we can’t know how until we know why them.”

“Eleven is stronger day by day. It draws monsters to them like sharks to the smell of blood.”

Eya says it conversationally, but the words are chilling, all the same.

“Then why not just Eleven? Why Mike, too, what can he see that we can’t?”

The both of them stop walking simultaneously, and Lucas and Dustin don’t notice until they’re a few steps ahead. “You don’t know?” asks Eya.

“Know what?”

Ife side-eyes her sister.

“Know what, you guys?” Lucas repeat, an edge forming in his voice.

Eya opens her mouth to answer,  
but no answer comes.

No words,  
not a whisper,  
not a  
sound.

It almost feels like  
the heartbeat  
of the earth stops,  
that something in the universe  
takes a pause to stare.

And then they blink, and time speeds up, the wind rustling through the wide-leaved maples, the roar of Buicks in the parking lot outside Big Buy floating down the lane, and Lucas catches a breath he hadn't realized he needed.

The twins are gone.

"What," Dustin says deliberately, "the hell. Just happened? Did you feel that? Where did they go?"

"Maybe they used their power to disappear," says Lucas, but he doesn't sound like he believes himself, either.

"I don't know, dude."

They turn back to look down the street behind them, then to the front to where they'd left Big Buy turning left. Nothing is out of place. Lucas checks his watch. It runs as it should, the colon blinking up at him as the seconds slip quietly, ominously by.

("Do not speak of their bond to them. Cannot know.")

“Why not? They should know. It’s Eleven’s life and Michael’s life in danger if they don’t. If none of them don’t.”

Thirteen shakes his head.

“Bond grows stronger day by day. Nami, she can see it. Glowing. Glowing. Can smell it from other dimensions and the monsters, they’re after them. No secrets between them. Know about the bond and it will get even stronger. Will only put them in more danger.”

Eya crosses her arms, exasperated. “Then what do you suggest we do? When do we tell them, if we ever do at all?”

“Time will come.”

“When?”

“Soon.”)

A merry tinkle at the door of the police station, and Hopper barely looks up. He’d come into the station this morning to see Harrington and Nami hunched over at his bit of the desk, speaking urgently to each other, trying to take notes over each other’s hands only to fall silent and start the cycle again. He’s curious, he wants to ask, and probably should—but whatever it is, they’re not going to tell him until they’ve wrestled it all as far as they can themselves. This much, Hopper knows.

He’ll give them until lunch, which is in less than a quarter of an hour.

Then he’s going to call Owens.

“Chief’s in his office. He’ll be glad to see you.”

Hopper withholds a scoff. He is never glad to see anyone who comes to this station, with perhaps the exception of J—

“Kid,” he says, straightening at his desk. “Thought you’d still be at the Wheelers. You didn’t come here yourself, did you?”

One of the Wheeler kid's sweaters is over Eleven's overalls this morning. Hopper's shit at fashion but he knows this much, because she doesn't own anything with stripes. She doesn't answer, seating herself in the chair in front of his desk.

"I'll take that as a yes." Hopper leans back in his own. "What did I say about walking around without Thirteen?"

"Not to do it."

"And you did it."

"We still have a few days before—"

"—before the bastard comes back. I know. But what's to say there aren't others on your tail?"

Eleven presses her lips shut. There's rebellion on her tongue, but she holds it. Hopper sighs.

"Please, just be careful. I don't want you to get hurt. I can't keep my eye on you every second of the day, I need to trust that you can at least stick around someone who can protect you."

"What did you want to tell me?"

Hopper regards her. He had planned to tell her about her bond with Mike, but Thirteen had showed up not more than twenty minutes before after a curious slowdown in time to keep his mouth shut, or else she'd be easier to sniff like than prey upwind.

"Nothing, kid. Sorry."

The hard, blazing quality in her eyes fades. Hopper wonders what it is he said. Sure, he'd chastised her a little, but not enough to warrant this reaction. Eleven sits with her hands shoved beneath her thighs, head hanging a little, and her ever-growing mane of curls falls in an untamed halo around her face.

She is sad.

"Hey, kid. Hey, look at me. What's going on?"

"I don't want to put my friends in danger again. Including Thirteen."

"What?"

"I do not know what it is. Danger. I think I attract it."

Hopper blinks. Something must've given it away.

"What makes you say that?"

"Bad. Bad things happen when I'm around. Mike is the one who sees them. He is around me most. Bad things, scary things. He's hurt. He's hurt because of me. There is blood on my hands. Blood I can't wash off. They are all scared, because of me."

"Whoa, whoa, hey. Blood on your hands? Where did you even—" Probably one of those Kurt Vonnegut books she keeps reading. Damn. Hopper needs to revise her library at the cabin. "Listen, you don't have blood on your hands. Okay? You don't. Wheeler needed to get stitches last night, right? What happened?"

"I came back to Hawkins because I knew I could save you." Hopper's heart leaps into his throat when Eleven looks up, finally, and her eyes are pearly with unshed tears. "But what if the answer this time is that I should go, and never come back?"

"Hey! Hey. What the hell are you saying?" Hopper gets up and comes around his desk, knocking Twelve's case file from the corner where Harrington had set it last night. His knees crack like the pop of firewood when he kneels down in front of her, then clumsily takes her hands in his. "You're going to stop it with that bullshit. You're not going anywhere. We're going to work this out, together. We need you, Wheeler needs you. I need you. Okay?"

She nods, body shuddering with sobs, then shakes her head. "You did not see. There was so much blood."

"What happened?"

"His hands."

"He hurt his hands?"

“Yes.”

“Does he still have them?”

“Yes?”

“He’ll be fine.”

“But—”

“Let me guess, he got hurt protecting you, right?”

“But if I were not there, if there was no one to protect, then he—”

She shuts up when Hopper holds his hand up. “That Wheeler kid has always been like that. Didn’t you say he threw himself from the cliffs once to save Henderson? If it weren’t you, it’d be someone else. He chooses this, we choose this. We chose this life, the one with you in it. Mike, myself, the Party. There is no such thing as ‘if El weren’t here,’ anymore. Fine, say you’re right. Say that you really do attract danger. Say that it puts all of us at risk. We know. And we don’t care.”

“How can—”

“We don’t care. We stand together. Danger? Bring it on. My life is defined by danger. Hell, I have a job because of danger.”

“But,” and this time, her words no longer sound like a protest. “But why?”

Hopper tightens his hands around hers.

“Because that it what it means to love someone, kid.”

“So you have seen, sir. She’s strong now, and not only that, she has the allyship of all the living subjects from our time here.”

Brenner scratches his chin thoughtfully, slowly. “Perhaps it would be advisable to simply do away with those that are easier to dispose of,

Ray. I will admit you may be right.”

“Sir?”

“Maybe she has allies. I have an army. I would like to see them face those from my homeworld and from Limbo.”

Ray purples in his cheeks. “That will be a bloodbath, sir.”

“Is that not what we seek?”

“Is it?” Ray swallows, the sound audible. “I thought the original goal was to bring the girl back under your wing as one of your own.”

“Of course I wanted to do that with as little confrontation as we can muster, Ray. Who do you take me for? A murderer?” Brenner chuckles to himself, while Ray remains stony in his seat across the table. “No, no, no. I’m simply a benefactor. This dimension and Eleven will be better off for it. You’ll see.”

“Will I?”

Brenner simply smiles.

“Okay, okay, but seriously,” Steve says, picking up his pen and trying to work out his own chicken scratch next to Nami’s flowing script. By the time the clock had hit noon, their stomachs had growled, and they’d decided to attack the problem over lunch. “We need to figure this out and tell the chief. We’re working against time, here.”

“Okay, hang on. I’m trying to steal your food,” Nami says, helping herself to another one of his onion rings.

“Hey, hey!” He swats her fingers with his fork, and she snickers before popping it in her mouth. “Eat your own goddamn lunch!”

“I like yours, though?” Nami says.

Steve rolls his eyes.

“Okay, so where were we at?” She wipes her fingers down on her napkin, already cheetah-spotted with oil, and leans over the table to look at the memo pad. “Right, so the Darker is a portal, check. Those in the afterlife, the Upside Down, and Limbo all have access to this dimension through it, check. Monsters from the Upside Down can come and go freely, those in Limbo can only stay short periods of time and don’t necessarily come through the Darker.”

“Have you had any strange experiences except the one with Limbo Barb in the fog?”

“No, dude. We’ve been over this.”

Steve chews on his lip. Near the bottom corner of the page, they’d jotted down *Benny + two kids*. It’s circled with a trio of question marks beside it. This was something Sara had shared, seeing a grizzled, pot-bellied man slouch through with a bullet wound in the side of his head mumbling about two kids.

“The kids,” Steve says, revisiting this. “People in the Party. My money’s on Thirteen and El.”

“Thirteen would have told me,” Nami says.

“Kid’s not exactly a blabbermouth, how are you so sure?”

“There are things we know that we don’t share.”

“Whoa, what? You know as a primary witness in this whole case, you’re legally bound by law to tell me everything to your knowledge?”

“And seeing as that’s a stupid-ass law, I’ve elected to ignore it,” Nami says. “It will do nothing but put the kids in danger and telling you won’t get us any answers.”

Steve opens his mouth, closes it, then opens it again to argue, then realizes she has a point he can’t argue. He wants the kids to be safe, too. That’s what his fucking job is, to keep them safe. Even if it’s at odds with the law? This was never in any textbooks and Steve doesn’t know if this is a judgment call he should be asking Hopper about.

“Okay, fine. So the kids aren’t Thirteen and El.”

“Has to be El plus someone else. Mike’s our next best answer.”

“Benny, Mike, and El. And what?”

“Maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe they saw Limbo Benny in the fog, like I saw Barb.” She leans forward, taking the pen from him. The ink bleeds against the grain of the page when he draws an arrow to their biggest circle, *destroy Darker?* “This is the big question.”

The booth cushion hisses when Steve’s back meets it. “I still don’t like what Sara told us. Fuck, Sara.”

“What?”

“Should we tell the Chief? Does he know? About everything, I mean, her being Four, her being in the afterlife.”

“About her being Four, I don’t know if now is the time. About telling him that she’s in the afterlife, don’t worry. I’ve got it handled.”

“How?”

“It’s handled, Steve.”

“Okay,” Steve says meekly.

Nami fixes her gaze upon him, then sighs. “Thirteen did tell me something.”

“What?”

“He does not know how we are going to destroy the Darker, just that we will. And when that time comes, the connection between this dimension and the Upside Down and Limbo will be broken.”

“Well,” Steve isn’t understanding the melancholy that tinges her words, “that’s great, right? That’s what we’re trying to do here.”

“But the connection between this life and the afterlife will also be severed.” She pushes her hash browns, soggy with ketchup, around

her plate. “Up until now, the afterlife has always been able to see what happens here. Soon, though. Soon they’ll really be gone. Until the next time their dimension aligns with ours, I suppose, whenever that is.”

Steve crosses his arms over his chest when he understands.

“Until then, we need to figure out how to get there, yeah?” Steve says. His voice is soft. “Sara told us half the story. She gave us some bits to work with. We just need to put them together.”

“She told us someone needs to die in the Darker for it to close. Is that something that you can really plan for, or figure out?”

“I know, I know. I don’t like the sound of it either.”

They come to a stalemate.

“What if it’s Brenner who dies in the Darker?”

Nami stops mashing her hash browns into a ketchup paste. “Brenner?”

“Someone has to die in the Darker for it to close. So we should make it our resident nutcase.”

“This is ideal, but what makes you think we’d even get him close enough to the Darker that he falls in at the opportune moment? What makes you think we can even get him that close to death to begin with? That’s a lot of ‘if this, then this’ that we’d have to hinge on.”

Ugh. These are all good points. Nami has a lot of those, and it’s killing Steve’s buzz, even though she’s right.

“It’s the best plan we’ve got, though, I suppose,” she says.

“If you knew what I was doing last year, you’d say this is a pretty good one.”

“Oh yeah? And what were you doing last year?”

“Giving pain of certain Death a blowjob,” Steve says without missing

a beat. Nami chokes on her food, and Steve watches her cough as amusement curls the corner of his lips.

"I'm sorry?" She takes frantic sips of her water, reaches for her napkin.

"Doing the things that led me to this line of work. Which involved flirting a lot with death."

"So you're good at this now," says Nami.

"Good? No," Steve shakes his head and begins to attempt folding an origami rhino out of his diner napkin. "No. You never get good at listening to the things that happen to these kids. You will always ask yourself if you are actually helping."

"You are."

Steve glances at her. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"No, you are. You're figuring this case out with and without what you have. You, me, us, all of us. We'll do it. It doesn't matter how. If it means we have to kill Brenner, then so be it. If it means one of us has to die, then." A kind of scared resolution solidifies in her face. "So be it."

"No one is sacrificing anything for any of us. Got it? We're not playing that game."

"But—"

"No one will die for any of us. Not you, not El, not me or Hopper. Capiche?"

Nami doesn't look like she believes him, not deep down, but she nods. Steve understands. She wants to agree.

He wants to believe himself, too.

"Capiche."

Mike's hands hurt too much to get on his bike. Putting pressure on the palms of his hands makes the stitches sting, and he can feel his pulse where the skin had broken.

But his mother has mercy on him, maybe because she feels bad for cooping him up in the house—so when Eleven shows up on his doorstep, looking like she hasn't slept a wink, Mike is up and at 'em without so much as a peep.

"You may walk around the block," she says. "Don't leave the cul-de-sac, please. And stay with Elle."

"What do mean, stay with El. I'm always with—"

"I don't want anything else to happen to you, understood?"

Mike scrambles to keep the front up. "Oh, what, as if El could do anything if we were really in danger?"

"I trust her."

Mike looks up from pulling his shoes on, laces limp in his useless hands. Karen Wheeler continues to read the home decor catalog on the kitchen counter until the silence grows noticeable, meeting his confusion over the faux marble.

He wonders how much she really knows about Eleven.

"What?"

"Nothing. Okay. Thanks, Mom."

"If anything happens, anything at all, you are to come straight home."

"I know, Mom."

"Thanks, Elle," says Karen, leaning in her stool to catch a glimpse of Eleven standing outside on the the doorstep. Today is another valiant attempt at a braid, held back with a glittery lime-green butterfly clip. It does nothing to tame the wild baby hairs around her face. "Keep him out of trouble."

“Yes. I am good at that.”

Mike snorts.

“Way to make me look like a wimp in front of my mom,” Mike says, closing the front door behind him.

“Your mom, she would never think that.”

“How do you know that?”

“Mamas love their children. No matter what.”

“Not everyone’s.”

“Most mamas. All mamas want to do their best. Even if it’s not good enough for us, they want it. They don’t always look like it.”

Eleven has her arms crossed over her chest. The nylon of her colorblock windbreak goes *shk-shk* against her sleeves with the motion of her walking.

“Sorry for this,” he says. “Even if my mom thought I was a wimp, she’d be right. I’m sorry. I know you like, uhm.” Wow *I know you like holding my hand because it grounds you* is suddenly far too vulnerable to speak aloud, so Mike doesn’t. “You like, uhm, handholding.”

A smile that Eleven does not seem to allow herself flirts with the corners of her lips and Mike nearly leans down to kiss it when someone says, “Jane.”

Oh, come on. They’ve barely made it past the second block.

Eleven tenses, her hand tightening around Mike’s nonexistent bicep. It’s a girl, shorter than Eleven but older, definitely older. She fidgets.

“Kali,” Eleven says.

“Wait, this is Kali?” Mike says. “You’re Eight?”

“That I am. And, you are?”

“Mike. Mike Wheeler.”

“Ah.” Kali nods at Mike and extends a hand. She wears fingerless gloves, which is pretty cool. He decides Eight is alright. Mike shakes her hand gingerly. “So you are the child that Jane ran away to save.”

“What? Okay, first of all, I am not a child,” Mike says.

“You’re fourteen.”

“Exactly! I’m a teenager. I’m practically an adult.”

Kali sighs.

“Also, she saved all of us. We’d probably all be dead if it weren’t for her. And her name is Eleven. EL.”

“You like being called that name?” Kali asks skeptically.

“Mike gave it to me,” Eleven replies, as if it should be obvious.

Kali’s eyes dart from Eleven’s face to Mike’s, then back to Eleven’s. “I wanted to find you again, and apologize.”

“It is okay.”

“It’s not okay. I received a call from One, someone we all respected before she was tossed out. I remembered her, very vaguely. But she said that I was needed here, and I figured this was my sign to find you again. My turn to find you.”

Eleven stands close to Mike, not in a cowering, afraid sort of way, but almost as if she’s ready to throw herself in front of him should she need to.

“You found me,” Eleven says simply.

“And I am sorry, truly. I held an anger that I wanted to see in you too, not because I wanted to corrupt you, but perhaps because I didn’t want to feel alone in it anymore. Axel, Dottie, Funshine—they were angry, too. But you were just like me. And I had thought, if you became the same person I was, then I would be right in my anger.”

Mike feels himself splitting at the seams with questions. Eleven had

simply told them that she and Eight had separated amicably, that they hadn't clicked like Eleven clicked with the Party, but there is a well of regret in Kali's face that says Eleven's story was a sanitized one.

"But you left, because you wanted to save people, not hurt them." Kali peers down at the sidewalk in a way that means she can't quite look Eleven in the face. "For a long time I did not understand. But the second we started driving away when you ran, I began to realize, at least, that there was something far greater than vengeance. It just took you to show me."

"Are you not angry anymore?"

Kali shrugs, smiling with a little rue. "It doesn't vanish overnight. But I do not let it lay the path of my life any longer."

"Thank you. Your apology, thank you for it," says Eleven. "And—thank you for teaching me."

"Oh? What was it that I taught you?"

"What you taught me, about anger. I could close the gate because of it."

"Did you now? I'm very impressed, Jane. El."

Kali leaves after asking if she can speak to One. "Better Hopper first," Mike pipes up, finding his voice. His head is still spinning from trying to match Kali's account and Eleven's account of her Chicago excursion.

"Hopper?"

"The policeman. He is my—we are family now."

Kali stares hard at Eleven. "I see," she says, finally. "Is it safe to talk about this with him?"

"He's probably the only person you can trust to talk to. Well, mostly," says Mike.

Eleven watches Kali go with an indecipherable expression on her face, and Mike waits until Kali is out of sight before he begins asking questions, and one at a time.

“What did she have to apologize to you for?”

Eleven shrugs.

“She sounds like she really regretted whatever it was.”

“Mm.”

“El,” Mike says, slowly. “She didn’t hurt you, did she?”

“No! No.”

“You said she can trick the mind into seeing things, that’s her gift.” Mike tilts his face. “Did she use it on you?”

“It does not matter,” Eleven says. She looks into his face. “It is over and in the past.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.” They’re in the shade of a weepy-branched elm tree, and when the breeze comes the chill in the shadows makes Mike shiver. “Even if it’s in the past, something none of us can change anymore. I wish I could have done something to help. I’m sorry.”

“You? You should not be.”

“What?”

“I let you be hurt.” Eleven slides her palm down the length of Mike’s forearm, just to survey the bandages on his hands this morning. His mom had helped him change them this morning, and Eleven winces when she holds his hand in both of hers. Pain, like she feels it herself, crosses her face. “All that is happening. All the danger. I hurt you. I keep hurting you.” She drops his hand and it feels uncomfortably final.

“El, you know that’s not true.”

"I keep hurting you. And Lucas and Dustin. And Max. And Will. And I will keep hurting you as long as you're around me. And nothing I do can stop it. Even if I hate it. Even if I don't want it."

She speaks without hearing him, like she's been thinking about this. Mike realizes that she must have had this on her mind already when she came by today, purpose set in her jaw.

"El," Mike ignores the sting in his hands when he reaches out now. The flex of his fingers sends pain shooting up to his elbows. Hers are limp, not curling in his hands the way he is familiar with. It's simple tolerance at being held, and it makes Mike's heart shake. "Did something happen?"

"I cannot face myself knowing that my existence, it puts people in danger."

"We want this!" Mike says, shaking her through his grip. Her eyes are glassy with tears like she can't bear to listen to him say this, but her face is expressionless. It's eerie and unsettling. "We want this. We want to be in your life, if that means constant danger, then that's what we want."

Eleven takes a breath deep into herself.

"But I don't want you."

The words don't all make sense next to each other, in this order. Mike understands them separately.

"What?"

"I don't want you."

"Wait, I heard you the first—what are you talking about?"

"I don't want this. I don't want to be around you."

"Because you're worried? And I'm telling you it's okay, that it's all okay, because—"

Eleven slides her hands out of his, gently but with authority that he

pales in the face of. “No.”

“Then—then why?”

“Because I don’t like you anymore.”

“El,” Mike straightens, feeling like bits of himself are fracturing and not sure where. “Come on. You don’t mean it, right?”

A muscle jumps in her cheek, and she takes a breath with the jut of her jaw. Her arms tighten across her chest and she does not answer, but Mike has learned how to read her body when she does not have the words.

“Is it because of Thirteen?”

She blinks. “Thirteen?”

(“It’s not going to work.”

“No?”

“All this time their bond has only been getting stronger. Physical separation’s not going to do jack shit. Hell, it might make it stronger. Like breaking a bone.”

“Can’t do anything.”

Nami’s eyes come back into focus. “No.” She laughs. “She’s using your name. So in terms of getting Mike to stay away from her, that’ll work.”

“Cruel.”

“Maybe you could make it so that it hurts a little less, I suppose.”

A slow blink from Thirteen, like a cat in the sun. “How?”

“Time will heal anything.”)

“It’s because he understands you more than I ever will, right?” All of these words sound nonsensical next to each other, but they come leaping from his lips like they’d been poised there for far longer than

he has known himself. “He knows what it’s like to live the life you’ve known. He can do so much more to protect you. He knows your past without saying and that’s—” Mike’s throat starts constricting here, traitorously. “And that’s something I’ll never be privy to, and it’s—that’s why, isn’t it?”

Tears slip down Eleven’s cheeks and leave dark streaks in her jacket. The quiver of her lower lip is nearly imperceptible, and she raises her head high, and still, says nothing.

“Say something,” Mike says. He hates that it sounds so weak.

“Yes,” she says.

“Yes, what I say is true?”

Eleven swallows. “Yes. It’s true.”

Thirteen’s vision had felt like a physical blow. A punch, maybe. Eleven’s words feel like a stab, not that Mike has ever been stabbed, but he’s sure it feels a bit like this—sharp, impossible, almost dreamlike. The mirror shattering on his palms had hurt, but not like this. The pain starts in his chest like it all leaves his hands to knot in his ribcage, cold and writhing all at once. Then it pulses outwards with each heartbeat.

And pain doesn’t last forever, Mike knows,

it won’t, it can’t,

*(just an average of seventy to eighty years),*

but this pain

just might.

It feels like the world

is laughing,

laughing,

stopping,

e n d i n g.

Ending.

And then it all speeds up very fast, all at once, with the rustle of Indiana summer wind in the elm and the chirrup of the Robinsons' midday sprinklers, the distant echo of boombox music in a driveway and everything suddenly so much and not enough, the sky too blue and not blue at all, the sun so hot and the shade so cold yet the world ends and Eleven is gone, already gone.

Thirteen must have been here.

She must have gone with him.

He can make it so that someone of his choosing moves through time with him, right?

Mike thinks he's going to vomit.

His house is just two blocks away. He can make it back alone.

(This isn't what Thirteen had seen, there is no blood on her face, but it is close enough: Eleven sitting on an upended crate, one that had been for the milk, hugging herself and crying like the world is ending, because it is, it has, a little bit. She's doubled over and Thirteen stands in the middle of their cabin watching her. Nami sits in the windowsill, head bowed, solemn. She knows heartbreak but not like this.

"I want to go back," she says, or he thinks she says. "I want to do it over. I lied. I lied to keep him safe. Friends don't lie, I lied, I lied. I'm so sorry. Mike, I'm so sorry."

Thirteen watches as her tears dot the dusty floor, a constellation in the ground.

"His face. You did not see his face. I'm so sorry. I hate it. I hate this. I want to go back."

Her body is wracked with sobs. The noise of it fills up the entire cabin, heartbreak too big and swollen for such a tiny space. Thirteen's knees thud against the floor when he kneels down in front of her, and Eleven doesn't resist when he hugs her.

"Sorry."

"I want to go back."

His watch ticks.

"I know.")

Joyce hears from Will that Mike is injured. Remembering how sick with worry about Will she had been two years prior, she decides to pull together a casserole and bring it over to the Wheelers. She's by no means as good a cook as Karen, but it's a casserole. She gets credit for trying.

"His hands're pulverized. Something happened with the mirrors in their basement, so El said."

Hopper had said this over the phone, grim. Joyce chewed on her nail as he sighed.

"What'd Nami tell you?"

"The things in Limbo are attracted by whatever attracted all those kids. Sharks to blood. We'll probably be getting a visit from our old friends the demogorgons any day now."

Joyce shut her eyes and shuddered.

"What's attracting them?"

Hopper's response had been slow and reluctant. "Probably El, if we're honest with ourselves."

"You're in early today, Joyce," the Big Buy manager drawls as she grabs a basket for casserole ingredients. He's holding a clipboard—

why's he always holding a clipboard? What's he writing? Joyce doesn't like it. She shrugs.

"Sick kid."

"Oh, your boy? What was his name—Will?"

"Not Will, no. If you'll excuse me," she says, brushing past.

Joyce is distracted as she puts casserole ingredients in her basket. What she knows, what Hopper has told her, both adds up and it doesn't. All the kids that are still alive are here in Hawkins, and Eleven's psychotic guardian from the lab will return, and—what? The kids will defeat him? The answer is too simple, here.

"Afternoon, Joyce," the cashier says pleasantly when she rings up her groceries.

"Hi."

"Early day?"

"Yeah, yeah," she says. There's a spot of grey on the horizon, a looming shadow, a bit like a thundercloud. "Early."

The grey spot fans out. It's the only thing on the cloudless horizon, and Joyce gets the bizarre sense that she's being watched.

"Joyce?"

"Huh?"

"Cash or credit?"

"Oh, uhm—cash, thanks."

She smooths out a handful of crumpled bills on the counter. When she looks back, the grey is gone, and so is the feeling that someone, or something, is watching her.

Hopper knows that this comes with the territory—coming home, late,

to be greeted by Thirteen and a closed door. Eleven had refused to come out all evening, and Thirteen had shared a quiet dinner with him with an empty chair beside them. Eleven had not even left her room for Eggos, which is when Hopper's irritation morphed into concern.

"Mike," is all Thirteen said.

"Do I want to know?" Hopper rolled his sleeves up, tired down to the bone.

"Maybe. Something that might affect this case."

"Oh, Jesus. And what's that?"

He had been a step too late. Not that Hopper knows if his telling her about their bonded souls would change anything about her decision. He'd only followed Thirteen's directions. Hell, it might have just strengthened her resolve to do what she did. Thirteen had watched him, carefully, as he stared into his measly helping of peas and potatoes and thinking about how much he needed to call Joyce about this.

Except Hopper doesn't, opting to sit in the doorway with a cigarette, because he is so great at emotional problem solving.

"Daddy?"

The word is full of static, sandy, and Hopper thinks it's just a rustle in the woods. A squirrel getting back to its den, a crow foraging for food. Then, again.

"Daddy? Are you there?"

Hopper straightens, cigarette smoke curling in a thin column from his fingers. The window's open, but Thirteen hasn't moved, still clutching his watch the same way Eleven hugs her tiger to sleep. Her door, too, is ajar, and by the weak light of the porch lamp he can still see her body curled into a thin blanket.

The crickets hum sleepily.

“El?” Hopper tries.

No immediate reply. The telegraph crackles.

“No, Daddy. It’s Sara.”

They say vertigo is the sensation of the ground inverting to be above you, and the sky finding itself beneath your feet. An upside-down reality, so to speak. Jim feels everything he thinks he knows shatter and then bounce back within seconds. His voice doesn’t even sound like his own when he replies.

“Sara?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Daddy. You remember me, right?”

Thirteen sleeps like the dead, so Jim takes care to shut Eleven’s bedroom door before answering. “Of course, I—” Wait. Is this really Sara? Given the track record of Hawkins in recent months, the answer is more likely than not yes, but Hopper is still throwing caution to the wind. “How do I know it’s you, not something from—” He clears his throat. “From Limbo?”

“Then you should ask me something, like how you would when you got home from work!”

Hopper pulls up a step stool, the one Eleven uses to reach the cupboards above the fridge, and sits heavily in it. He tries to think of something, but comes up empty—not for lack of remembering, but Hopper has so carefully taped and stitched up this corner of his life so that he won’t have to remember.

“Daddy?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” he says. “Uhm—what was your favorite bit from your favorite book?”

“Oh, that’s easy. ‘Dear old world, you are very lovely, and I am glad to be alive in you.’ From *Anne of Green Gables*. I still read it, you know? Here in the far place.”

Hopper laces his fingers together and rests his chin upon them,

elbows digging into his knees as he wills himself not to tear up. He fails, feeling heat prickles in the corners of his eyes, and he closes them so they won't fall.

"I got that right, didn't I?"

"How are you doing this?"

"Talking to you?"

"Yeah, how—how do you even—"

"There's a girl standing behind you, her name is Nami. She brought me here."

Hopper sits up and whirls, peering through the darkness. There is no one, no one except for Thirteen's body curled up on the couch.

"Nami?" he says, knowing it's fruitless. He looks back to the telegraph. "Why'd she bring you here?"

"Because I never had a chance to say bye-bye, Daddy. Remember what Mommy said? Bye-byes should be said early, because when the time comes, you won't have the chance to. And we were silly because we forgot, didn't we?"

"Sara—"

"I know you still have a lot of questions, Daddy. And I know you still blame yourself for what happened, and I'm really sad to know that you and Mommy aren't together anymore. But watching you so long, I think you don't need the answers anymore."

"Sara, hon, how can that ever be true?" Hopper wants to grab the telegraph and hug it, as if it would be warm like Sara had been once.

"I—"

"El, if I were still there, we would be like sisters, right?"

The mention of Eleven drags Hopper back down to earth and he realizes that he's still in a cabin with two kids, and tries to pull himself together. "Sure, yeah, I mean—if you were still here, then I

never would have met her, but sure. You would be. I think you guys might have been around the same age.”

“She makes you smile a lot, right Daddy?”

Hopper thinks of that time Eleven destroyed the cabin and wonders if Sara saw all that, too. “You could say that.”

“And you read her *Anne of Green Gables*?”

“Sure do.”

“Then Daddy, I think you will be just fine.”

“What do you mean? Sara, what’s all this about?”

“I have to go soon. But there are some things I can tell you, Daddy. Some things that Nami said will help.”

“Help? Help with what, what have you seen? What do you know?”

The idea that Sara—angel-haired, frail, tiny Sara, in her blue jacket and sundress that Hopper always remembers her in, not the sickly bland hospital gown—knows anything about the Darker or Limbo would be ludicrous to him in simpler time. But he has seen and lived through enough to know to listen first, scoff later.

“Everything that comes out of the Darker is afraid of the same thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“They are afraid of life.”

Hopper blinks uncomprehendingly.

“They’re what?”

“Life. Living things have souls. And the things from Limbo do not. That’s why they’re only shadows, Daddy. And they’ll always be shadows.”

What is that supposed to mean? It almost feels like a full idea, and there must be a reason for Sara to be telling him this—a reason for

Nami to have brought her here.

“Sara, are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“The—the Limbo ones, do they bother you where you are now?”

“Nope, they don’t!”

Hopper can taste the summer in the back of his throat when he breathes in and tries not to let his emotions come out of their perfect little compartments that he’s worked so long and hard to build.

“Good.”

“I have to go now, Daddy,” says Sara. “Don’t do anything dumb.”

“I’ve never done anything dumb in my life, Sar-bear.”

“Please be safe. You need to be there for El.”

“I will.”

The radio crackles, and Hopper thinks that she has already gone.  
“Bye, Daddy.”

“Bye,” Hopper says, knot in his throat threatening to choke him.

Only then does the radio fall silent, and Jim allows himself a sniffle.  
“Why did you bring her here?”

Nami does not answer right away. Hopper wonders how long it takes for her to get back to her body—if it’s instantaneous, or if it takes the same amount of time it would for her to walk across the city. Thirteen slumbers on, unaffected, unknowing, lost in a place that is only his. Hopper hopes Eleven is, too.

“Because I think Steve and I, we’ve figured out how to destroy the Darker.” Her voice is clearer over the telegraph. “Sara helped us. We thought you should hear her voice, too.”

Hopper wants to be mad, but he doesn’t even know what about. Mad,

that Nami had brought Sara back to speak to him again? Mad to know what could have been? Mad, knowing that whatever they know that he doesn't, probably won't be something he'll like?

So, instead of trying to figure that out, he sighs.

"Call me in the morning."

"Aye-aye, Chief."

"Stop hanging out with Harrington."

"Tough luck. I actually like the guy."

"Makes two of us."

Nami laughs, and Hopper, well, can't help himself, either.

Here is the thing about plans: Eleven is not so sure they work. Thirteen knows what he knows, they think they know what they know, and still, yet. Life does not work the way they hope it does.

"Hey!" Dustin's ear-to-ear grin is good to see, great to see. He knocked on the cabin door this morning with Lucas. Eleven did not think she needed it until she had it. But it fades when he sees her face. She's not sure what she looks like so she tries to make it look happier. "Why such a long face?"

"My face is not that long. Is it long?"

"He's asking why you look so glum," Lucas says. "Something happen?"

She looks between the two of them. Thirteen says nothing.

"Something, uhm. Something happened."

"It's Mike, right?" Dustin asks. "We tried going over to his house yesterday but his mom told us that he wanted to be alone, but we told her we'd gotten snacks for him and he still wanted to be alone. Is

he like, dying? What's going on? We thought he'd gotten treatment and everything for his hands! And he never says he wants to be alone. There's something wrong and I don't like it."

Eleven does not reply, for so long that Lucas leans in closer.

"You don't look so good, El."

"Wait," says Lucas. "Did you guys fight?"

"Lucas, we all know that the world would end before El and Mike got into a fight," Dustin says.

She takes a long enough of a pause that both of them start shouting in disbelief simultaneously.

"Are you serious? About what?"

"It was Mike, wasn't it? What'd he do?"

"Mike couldn't be mean if he tried, Lucas."

"Uhm, Max exists!"

"Oh, right, haha. I mean, no, not haha. But." He turns to Eleven and the issue at hand again, tightening his grip on his bike handlebars. "You're serious?"

Eleven casts her gaze over to Thirteen on the couch, then back to their faces. She has to hand it to them. They cotton on a lot faster now than they used to.

"You wanna take a walk? You look like you need one."

"Hopper, he said I shouldn't leave the cabin without Thirteen."

"What, is he like your official bodyguard now?" Lucas asks. Then realization begins to dawn on his face, eyes going wide as saucers. "Oh," he says, dragging it out. "Is this what it was about?"

"Shh!" Eleven shoves him out of the doorway so the sound doesn't carry, but the window's open. Futile. Stupid? "Walk, fine. Take a

walk.”

“You have to tell us what happened, like, now.”

*Thump thump* go their bike tires as they bounce down the porch steps. Eleven aims a kick at a pebble, misses spectacularly, and hates how it reminds her of Mike. Everything does, it does.

“We are—we broke up.”

“What?” Lucas hisses.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Dustin holds both his hands up, shaking his head like he’s only just now hearing her. He ignores the crash of his bike into the dirt. The back wheel spins lazily, spokes catching the sunlight. “Broke up? You’re kidding.”

Eleven sighs.

“You’re not?” Lucas says.

“But why?” Dustin asks.

Friends don’t lie. But the truth?

“I had to.”

There, that’s good enough.

“You had to?” Skepticism bleeds into Lucas’ voice. “Who made you?”

“No one. I did it myself. But I had to.”

“El,” Dustin stops now, even though they’re standing in the middle of the road. No cars frequent these back roads much. But still. Eleven is ansty standing on the faded yellow lane striping. “Did the time bomb see something? I don’t know, something we should know? About Mike?”

“No.” And if he did, she doesn’t know it. So it’s not really a lie.

“Then—so, that’s it? You guys are just over?”

Lucas still sounds like he doesn't believe her. And some part of Eleven is happy, in a weird way. This is what Hopper says for feelings that seem like they don't belong in some moments or others. "In a weird way," he'll say. Eleven is happy in a weird way, happy because she and Mike must have had something that made separation sound as impossible as this. Happy that they had something at all.

Nope. Nope! She is not crying about this again. Not consecutive days in a row. Maybe tomorrow.

"Yeah," she says, and it's the final word on the matter.

"Damn." Dustin falls silent as they process this. Not well, she is sure. She is not processing any of this well but it is necessary.

"Are we allowed to ask what happened?"

"No. Well, I don't know."

"Okay, we won't," Dustin says, with feeling. Eleven looks up at him, but he's giving Lucas a Look, one that he probably learned from Max. She is really good at Looks. "Well, I was going to ask if we could go to Mike's house, but maybe we can go to Will's, or something? Mrs. Byers always lets us use the toaster if you want Eggos."

"No Eggos," Eleven says.

"Oh, and we can also get the chocolate syr—wait. What? No Eggos?"

"How about," Eleven struggles to think of something she likes to eat that isn't directly or indirectly associated, in some way, with Mike. She comes up empty. Maybe they like Eggos and raspberry waffles from Birdie's and chocolate pudding pops because Mike has always been there. And now he is not. "Let's go and see."

The air is tight. Tense, that's the word. It's tense, because Eleven knows that they are bursting with questions but won't ask them. Somehow it feels like they are growing up and she does not know if she likes it or hates it but they would have asked without holding back two years ago. This she is sure of.

Downtown starts to come into view on the fringe of the horizon. The

rumble of cars and distant music makes it feel like a real world again, with the clicking of their bike gears as they walk them along.

“You cannot tell him why.”

“Huh?”

“You cannot tell him that it is because of him. How safe he is. Or is not.”

“Mike?” Lucas powerwalks a smidgen faster so he can look at Eleven’s face. “You mean Mike? What can’t he know?”

“Danger. Danger because of me.”

“He’s in danger because of you?”

“You broke up with him to protect him.”

Lucas says it so certainly that Eleven can only hang her head.

They stand there, a somber trio.

“Damn,” is all Dustin says.

“I know.” Her words are miserable.

“So we can’t tell him?”

“Uhm, no, Dustin! That was the whole point of her breaking up with him. If he knows, I mean, you know how Mike is. He’d never let you go.”

“Thank you,” Eleven says, grateful at least that Lucas can understand her rationale. Even if he doesn’t like it. None of them like it.

But she chooses this. Pain, she chooses it. Because that is what we do for the people you love, right?

“You think you’ll feel better if you come play with Tews?” Dustin suggests.

Cat? No. Eleven shakes her head.

“Erica got a hamster last weekend, how about that?”

“Hamster?”

“It’s like a little mouse, except cuter and fluffier,” Dustin says.

“I want to see.”

“Okay, snacks, then my house!”

And it is a good plan.

But life, life doesn’t like plans. They do not always work.

It is a good plan, if not for the distant rumble one block from Big Buy, and Dustin peers up from under the bill of his baseball cap. It begins slow. Almost haunting. Then it sounds like an earthquake. The one from the night outside the arcade. There is shaking. But then it sounds like screaming, people screaming.

“What the fuck?” Lucas says. “What is—”

There is a dark, smoky thing in the sky.

“Move!” Dustin shrieks. His voice cracks and his bike makes a loud clang on the sidewalk.

The street is shaking too. But it is not an earthquake. The smoky black entity moves past the Hawk where the man is hanging—oh, no. Oh no. Mad Max, Beyond Thunderdome. Oh no, he falls! It looks like it hurts. She wants to run over to see if he is okay but he is too far. And the smoke monster moves fast, so fast, so Eleven grabs Dustin’s and Lucas’s hands and they run inside the Big Buy.

Then the asphalt cracks. The smoke monster destroys everything in its path, kind of like an asteroid hitting earth. But she knows who it is.

They know.

“Dustin!”

"I got you, I got you!" he says. He does not run as fast as her and Lucas. The lights inside Big Buy are flickering and they duck as cans topple off the shelves and patrons shriek in panic.

"Hide El!" Lucas yells. "In a fridge, in the back, anything. It's her he wants!"

"In a fridge? No! She'll freeze!"

"Oh my God, not forever! It'll have to do, Dustin!"

The glass at the automatic doors shatters and Eleven has to shut her eyes against the sound. It reminds her of when she had been here alone in the past, stealing Eggos.

"El! Come on, let's go—"

The noise, it gets worse. Shadow Brenner leaves behinds a trail of ash where he moves, and Lucas shouts something unintelligible before giving Eleven and Dustin a mighty shove. They make it under the shelf of fruits, the ones Eleven doesn't like. Bananas. Mushy and gross. Dustin hunkers down beside her and grabs her hands.

"Oh God, we are not going to die," he says. "Holy shit, we're going to die." That is reassuring of him. "Holy shit. I did not picture it like this. It was supposed to be in bed when I am old with no teeth."

"I am sorry," Eleven whispers. She hopes he can hear her over the din.

Brenner takes on a corporeal form when he finds her. Corporeal, it means, with a body. He smiles but she knows it's one of those bad kinds. It's not a real one. Lucas stands his ground in front of them and spits at Brenner's feet. It is a lonely place to be, between your friends and death. Eleven knows it and she wants to pull Lucas away from him.

"Don't touch her, you sick bastard! You didn't get her last time, you won't get her this time!"

"Mr. Sinclair. It's so wonderful to see you again."

“Don’t call me that!”

“You want El? Nothing’s changed, big guy!” Dustin scrambles to his feet and Eleven makes a helpless noise as though to say *no, don’t, don’t put yourself in the line of danger too*. But her throat is tight with fear. Something worse too. Regret. It’s sour. “You have to kill us first! That’s how it goes.”

Brenner sighs. “Boys, let’s play nice.”

“No more mister fucking Nice Guy here!” Lucas says.

Brenner chooses to ignore him now. Instead he looks right at Eleven. Smile, horrible smile. She shudders and wants to throw her hand out and make him go flying. There isn’t anyone left in the store. No one would see her do it. But she wants to curl up into a ball and cry. She wants him to disappear. She wants Mike. She doesn’t want to be weak.

“Eleven,” he murmurs. “Come home to Papa, won’t you?”

“You’re sick,” Dustin says. “You’re sick! You’ll never be her dad. You never were her dad, you sick freak. The only person who can even dream about calling himself El’s dad is Hopper!”

Brenner chuckles. “Hopper? The police chief?”

A hand comes down upon Brenner’s neat, suited shoulder, turning him around with a force that most would be afraid to use with him. Dustin feels a sigh of relief threaten in the base of his chest at the sight of Hopper, just as imposing as Brenner, step up to him with black fury in his face.

“Evening, sir. Yeah, that’d be me. Step away from my daughter,” he says.

And his fist connects with Brenner’s face.

Many things happen.

Here are all the things that happen at once: Thirteen puts his watch down. He gets up from the couch. There's an itch in his hands and time slows down around him. When he looks outside a bird hangs in midair, mid-wingbeat, twig a jagged black line in its beak. Nami feels it too. She feels it because for the first time the world stops around her and she does not. And Nami is not the only one who feels it.

Here are all the things that happen in succession: "What's going on?"

Pip does not look up from his lighter, one he'd pilfered from the liquor store that he is definitely too young to be in, but Ife and Eya know not to ask when it comes to him. "Thirteen. It's him."

Here are all the things that follow: Mike feels a crushing pain strike him in the chest, a very real pain, not the dull ache of heartbreak that has been buzzing in the back of his head all afternoon. "Mike!" says Holly, but her voice feels very far away.

Nami feels the wind whip her hair back into her face when she throws her motel door open, running out onto the balcony to hear the distant groan of something otherworldly. There is a dark, deep crack in the asphalt, and she whiteknuckles on the railing before running down the corridor to bang on Ife's door, Kali's door, and hopes that Pip is in one of them.

Thirteen had said to keep on their toes. Maybe this is what he meant.

"What is going on?" Eya is the one who answers their door. "There is a commotion outside."

"He's here. I don't know what he wants, but Thirteen is telling us to find Eleven. That's why—" She gestures at the world around them, the unnerving stationary nature of it. "He's giving us time. I don't know how long he can maintain it, so let's move it!"

This is not a perfect science. It's faulty at best. Thirteen has no idea when he can expect them to show up at the grocery where Mike's mother had bought him a Reese's, but Thirteen, even, feels like time moves in slow motion when he opens the cabin door. Then it moves too fast, and he doesn't know how he makes it to downtown. Warm blood meets his lip. He licks. Iron fills his mouth. There's sound, like

a hum in his throat, but he doesn't know if he hears or it feels it.

There is ash on the ground.

"Thirteen!"

Nami's face is a welcome sight. She runs down the broken sidewalks with a ragtag crew in tow—Pip, Kali, the twins. He wonders where Steve is. Inside Big Buy is a flare of light that he knows is the kind that comes from a rifle when it is fired.

"It's the Doctor, right?" she asks.

"Thirteen, you are bleeding so much!" Pip holds his hand up as though to wipe it from Thirteen's nose, and in this moment of one reality meeting another Thirteen takes the time to bend down to Pip's height. He wipes his small fingers across Thirteen's cheeks and he realizes that he must be bleeding from his tear ducts, too. "Stop! We can handle it from here!"

"You guys do this to protect her?" Kali asks. It is not a challenge. It is confusion, maybe.

"Not just her. Everyone."

Kali scoffs. "We do not have a responsibility to save anyone after the hand this world has dealt to us."

"Maybe not," Eya says. "But in this terrible hand I received this gift. And to fight for the people I care about is what I will choose to do with it."

Kali stares at her, open mouthed.

Ife holds out her hand, and Eya takes it. They run towards the gunfire. Just before they leap over the torn threshold of the grocery they vanish into thin air.

"Me too," Pip says. Kali looks down at him. "Come on. I promise it'll be fun! Plus, you haven't even had a chance to see what I can do, right? It's, like, the best! You gotta see Papa's face!"

He holds out his hand. It's dirty, like he hasn't washed his hands in a week, but Kali regards him quietly for a moment longer before she takes his hand, too. And they run.

"Always you and me in the end, isn't it?" Nami says.

"Would rather we not hold hands."

"Fine by me, punk ass," she says, chuckling. "Let go now. You're starting to look like a zombie."

"Scared."

"I am too, buddy," she says. "Maybe this counts for something, yeah?"

Thirteen stares at her offered hand.

"Yeah."

And time speeds up all the way again.

Hopper has never had the privilege of fighting a half-human, half-monster before, specifically not Brenner, so this is definitely a new experience for him. So far he's managed to put bullets in at least three different Chef Boyardee canned soups so he'll say in terms of target practice with stationary objects, he's going pretty good.

His fist fucking hurts from punching Brenner in the face, though. Guy feels like he's made out of steel.

"Stay back!" he barks. He has no idea how Eleven ended up in Big Buy with Sinclair and Henderson, considering Thirteen and the Wheeler kid would be more likely candidates. But they're here now, so this is what he has to work with.

"We are staying back!" Lucas says.

"We're just trying to help!"

The help is them chucking tomatoes at the bastard, which Hopper admits would be funny if they weren't kissing Death's hems right now. Most things in his life would be a fucking riot, actually, if they weren't, well. In his life. Eleven assists by throwing entire crates of watermelons at him without breaking a sweat, and this actually does serve as a good enough a distraction for Hopper to land some shots. Not that they're effective, but they slow Brenner down slightly.

"Keep throwing, guys!" Lucas says, lobbing bananas rapidfire as he tears each free from its bunch. They fly at Brenner somewhat uselessly, bright yellow boomerangs in the chaos, before Hopper sees a tiny, blond-haired kid cartwheel into the fray.

"Twelve! No, fucking hell—stay back!"

"Nah, this is fun!"

Brenner takes pause at the sight of this child, which is more than Hopper can say he has achieved so far. The swirling smoke and ash ceases when Brenner stills, sizing Pip up this time. He almost looks afraid.

"Would you like to come home with your sister, Twelve? You would make a lovely pair."

Pip scrunches his nose. He's actually thinking? Hopper withholds a groan.

"I'm okay. These guys are way cooler. They think I'm cool. You think I'm a freak."

Hopper has seen what Twelve can do, perhaps the most destructive kid out of all the ones who are still alive. But that forest fire that they had driven upon had been nothing compared to what Pip does now, and he has no idea how it is so—the fire erupts from him like magma. The things around them do not simply catch on fire. They explode with it, everything a miniature bomb, and the heat is unbearable. Things that shouldn't even be able to ignite catch on fire. But it does not touch him.

"What have you done!" Brenner shouts at Pip, who is only wracked

with peals of laughter. “Where are they?”

Hopper frowns. He stands right in front of Brenner, in full sight, and he’s about to say something when he feels a hand at his back.

When he turns, he sees Kali, Eight, the one that Eleven said she had met. She holds a finger to her lips.

“Move as fast and quiet as you can. He cannot see you but I am not sure for how long.”

“Are you doing this?”

“We are doing this,” Kali says. She looks over her shoulder and jerks her chin. “Move!”

“You’re making things explode?”

“Oh, no. That’s Eya. She’s enhancing what he can do. Now go! I didn’t risk it all for it to go to waste.”

So Hopper shoulders his gun and runs after the kids he has come to fear for.

Now, things do not move in slow motion, but Thirteen feels like they do when he sees Ife and Eya carry Pip out of the Big Buy.

Brenner leaves first. It seems that the fire, once again, becomes too much for him. He sweeps away in the same body of black smoke in which he had come. He passes right over them, over the streets, vanishing into the horizon. But he does not depart without leaving behind a trail of destruction in his wake this time. And it includes Pip.

“Twelve!” Dustin shouts.

“He is still here,” Nami says immediately, though Thirteen does not know if she is telling the truth. Pip looks broken. He looks like a doll that has been forgotten. There is blood, lots of blood, and Ife runs with him in her arms as the last bits of Big Buy combust behind

them.

“Fire started getting out of control when he got hurt,” Eya says breathlessly. Blood is streaming from her nose. All their noses. Pip has it the worst. His whole face is bloody.

“What happened?”

“The Doctor turned into this big ball of smoke and threw himself into him,” Ife explains. “We could hear him screaming. We couldn’t see where he was. It was like he was caught in a black tornado. He finally threw him to the ground and that is when he left, but the fire did not cease. He looked like this.”

Thirteen’s heart contracts when he sees that one of Pip’s eyes is swollen shut. “Hopper?” he says, turning to him. Eleven does this a lot when she is unsure of what to do.

“Can we know when he’ll come back? Today, not today, or what?”

“Not today. But I do not know when,” Thirteen says.

“Nami, take who you can back to the motel. Hide there and don’t come out, now that he knows you all are here and that you all are angry. If he really wants to, he’ll find you, but keep everyone quiet. Tell Steve. We need to get what we know together.”

The chief never calls Steve Steve. It’s always Harrington.

“You, Thirteen. Take El back to the cabin. You guys don’t go anywhere without the other, got it?” He nods at Dustin and Lucas. “You two come with me to the hospital. I don’t trust you guys to get home yourselves.”

“But—”

“No buts. You are not dying on my watch. I need one of you to call the fire department. And if that kid comes around I need you guys there to calm him down.”

“Okay,” Dustin says. “I’m good at calming down people who just got beat into a pulp.”

Wonder what that means? Thirteen should ask one day.

“Hop,” Eleven says, clutching onto the elbow of his jacket.

“I’ll be fine, kid. Things’ll be okay.”

“Make sure Mike is okay?”

“I’ll try.”

“Let’s go,” Thirteen says.

Neither of them speak on the way back to the cabin. Hawkins looks like a ghost town, shrapnel and debris from the demise of Big Buy littered in the streets, chunks of asphalt torn from the roads. They dot the sidewalks like oil stains, and Thirteen feels his own blood drying on his face. It will take ages to recoup.

Eleven has her fists curled as she walks but she holds her head high.

“Brave,” he says, as they finally enter the line of the woods between the city and the cabin.

“You are too.”

Strained silence.

“Did not think the past would come haunt us like this.”

“I want to fight. I want to do something. I do not want to sit in the cabin, but I know that it is all we can do until we know what we have all come to do.” She casts him a sidelong glance. “There is a plan for all of us, right?”

“Think so.”

“You don’t know what it is, right?”

“Just see all of us at the end.”

“The end?”

He nods. “The end.”

“The end of what?”

Something niggles at the back of Thirteen’s brain. He doesn’t know why, and it feels like a sneeze that never comes. A word he can’t remember. Something about the air is muted, like it moves in slow motion, but he is not doing anything. Not that he knows of. The cabin door creaks as they push it open, then closed.

“Do you feel that?”

Eleven looks at him and everything feels like thick jelly against his skin.

“No,” she says.

Thirteen frowns.

“What is it that I am supposed to feel?”

The watch. Thirteen crosses the cabin to his couch, pulling the blankets from the cushions. Where is it? Dust dances through the light from the window as Thirteen tugs the cushions from the seat and finds it facedown. The back of it gleams dull, a dying ember.

“Thirteen?”

He picks it up. His stomach feels cold when he turns it over in his palms.

There is no telltale *tick tick* of the second hand. It is not still, not exactly.

Instead, the needle quivers in place just above the number eleven. A sharp flash of gold. A warning.

### Notes for the Chapter:

ost of the chapter is [tonight - timecop1983!!](#) once again thank you everyone so much for your patience!! ^o^ i'll work hard on chapter 7 and 8!!